SLAYERS
12
THE DYNAST PLOT
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1: Ah, the Demons One Meets on the Road

As darkness fell, so too did silence. A city of this size would normally still have bars open, leaving drunkards and other miscreants to roam the darkened streets... but this particular town was locked down tight. We were living in dangerous times, after all.

That meant I was the only soul out on the road. My cape flapped in the darkness, its color blending in with the night as I ran while trying to mask my footfalls as best I could. I was headed for—

"More bandit bullying?"

Grk! The sound of that unexpected voice from behind me sent a shudder through my body.

I whipped around. "Yeesh... don't startle me like that, Gourry."

Yep. The guy standing there in the faint moonlight with a wearied expression was my traveling companion, Gourry. He was tall, blond, handsome, and a master swordsman... which was all well and good. The fact that he had seaweed for brains? Not so much. He'd probably seen me slipping out of my room at the inn and tailed me.

"You're really the one complaining here?" he said. "Why do you always have to slip out on your own like this?"

"What, you wanted an invite?"

"Of course not."

Our conversation was held entirely in whispers. It was nighttime, after all, so we couldn't exactly cause a scene.

"C'moooon, man. I gotta go bully some bandits to replenish our travel funds. And to blow off steam," I said sulkily.

Gourry's expression remained exhausted. "Are you still annoyed about *that*?"

"'Course I am," I admitted bluntly.

He let out a soft sigh.

"Just to confirm... Is this report *entirely* accurate?" So the old sorcerer inquired, but his face and attitude were saying, *"This bitch is trying to play me."*

Ten days prior, I'd compiled the recent goings-on of Crimson Town into a report that I submitted to the Telmodd City sorcerers' council. I'd filled five scrolls with my account of what went down, but when this old council bigwig glanced through it, his initial response was skepticism.

"It is," I assured him confidently.

The old sorcerer just looked at me with a grimace. “Were there... any other witnesses?”

I was briefly stumped. Gourry had been there from start to finish, but where most people had their long-term memory, he had a bowl of mush. Even if I brought him in as a witness, he’d probably just say, “Did that all really happen?”—the final nail in the “she’s lying” coffin.

So after a bit of thought, I ultimately replied, “My companion... isn’t really credible. There are no other living witnesses to the report as written.”

“Hmm... I see...” The sorcerer fell into uncomfortable silence. “I confess I find this difficult to believe. The involvement of the General of the Dynast’s sword, the connection to the incident in Bezeld... It’s all far too extraordinary.”

Grr...

I could feel a vein bulging in my forehead under the sorcerer’s dubious gaze. But, objectively speaking, he wasn’t wrong to feel the way he did. While the world was full of entities that fell under the “demon” umbrella, the higher-ranking ones were few and far between. There were basically no formal records documenting their existence.

Dark Lord Shabranigdu, lord of all the world’s demons, had five faithful lieutenants, each with their various Priest and General servants—that was basically the hierarchy of the upper echelons of (what passed for) demon society. But most sorcerers, in practice, regarded this as mere legend.

In all honesty, there was a time when I, too, found the stories of a dark lord in the mountains of Kataart pretty sketch. If past-Lina had read a report like the one I’d handed in, I also would’ve written it off as fame-grubbing nonsense. So on one hand, I couldn’t really blame the old sorcerer for his reaction.

On the other... it still pissed me off!

“Well... I shall accept your report. But the council has a small request for you. If you really did what you claim to have done, you should find it simple enough.” There was blatant sarcasm in the old sorcerer’s voice.

The council ended up asking me to get to the bottom of some recent reports of mass lesser and brass demon spawnings. I was to head to the Kingdom of Dils, where there’d been a spate of them lately. But as with all council jobs, the payment I’d be getting for the job was well under what the work was worth, so I naturally didn’t want to do it. There were no leads on the investigation, and there was no telling how long it would take just to interview the people involved. It was gross to expect someone to do such an annoying job for so little compensation. Refusing would have been easy...

Except if I'd simply said no, I knew exactly what that old sorcerer would've thought: *"Ah, she's scared of demons. This confirms her report is a lie."* Thus I'd swallowed my pride and taken the crummy job.

Of course, I'd also requested a massive increase in remuneration. The piddly payment they were offering hardly covered such an open-ended task. It wouldn't have even covered room and board. In lieu of money, however, the council bigwig offered me payment in kind—a letter that I could show to any local sorcerers' council for free lodging and meals. Too bad not every city we stopped in had a branch, and even if it did, the quality of the food there wasn't exactly guaranteed.

The result? After just a little traveling and asking around, Gourry and I had already burned through the advance the council had given us. It was hardly the kind of situation that keeps you in high spirits. So if I vented my frustration by busting up a bandit gang and stealing—er, reappropriating—their cache to recoup my traveling expenses, who could blame me?

"Well... there's nothing wrong with beating up bandits, and I can't tell you to stop doing what's clearly in your nature..."

"My nature?" *I'm not a wild animal!* I was about to say something, but held off.

"Lina," Gourry called abruptly.

"I know." I nodded firmly in response.

The darkness around us had just grown deeper, and it wasn't a shadow passing over the moon. There was a presence mixed in with the darkness itself. Hatred, sorrow, jealousy, despair... All the negative emotions that plagued living things steeped the air in a melange.

Miasma. That can only mean...

"Say, Lina... would this be another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into?" Gourry muttered.

Before I could respond—*Thud!*—I heard an impact some distance away.

"Over there!" I called. Gourry and I took off at the same time. "It was somewhere around here..."

"Lina! Look!" Gourry stopped on a street corner and pointed. There were fragments of something scattered across the road. And beyond them lay...

A person?!

We ran up to the man on the ground. He looked a little over twenty years old. Dark fluid pooled around him, gleaming crimson in the moonlight. I lifted him into my arms, but it was clear he was already dead, bleeding from a gaping wound in his chest.

"What in the..." I started. But before I could finish the thought, I sensed a rush of malice headed our way.

Gourry sprang into action. The sharp clang of metal on metal rang out beside me as I jumped away. I looked over to see Gourry, sword in hand, squaring off with a dark figure.

And when I say "dark," I don't mean that it was hidden by the shadows. I mean that it was pitch-black from head to toe, including the light plate armor it wore and the sword it held. Curious white patterns scrawled all over its body stood out in the faint light of the moon. This dark figure looked a bit like a shaman from some weird religion, but its aura revealed its true nature...

Yup, we've got a demon on our hands!

It hadn't appeared out of thin air. I could see that the second-floor window of a nearby building (what looked like an inn) had been broken from the inside. I was guessing this thing had attacked a man staying there, then leaped out the window to confirm the kill.

"I have... business with... that man." The creature turned toward the fallen man, speaking in a halting, muffled tone.

"He's already dead," I told it.

My words caused the creature to fall silent for a time. Its face-not-face (which was really just a pattern on a black field) turned my way. "He is... dead?" It seemed to think for a moment before tilting its head. "I see... He is dead..." it whispered, cocking its head again and falling quiet once more.

Not one of our brighter demons, I guess...

After a period of silence, it looked back up at me. "You saw... me..."

Hang on a minute! Don't you dare—

Before I could even object, the "shaman" took off! It dashed to the side and got in close to me.

It's fast! I just barely managed to block its sweeping slash with my half-drawn shortsword. I then leaped in the opposite direction. *And strong!*

Truth be told, it was sheer luck that I was able to defend myself. If I'd moved a split second slower, the creature would've lopped my head off. And if I'd finished drawing my sword all the way, I wouldn't have been braced to resist the force of the blow completely. It would've cut my stomach open.

The shaman, realizing that its strike had been blocked, withdrew its sword... It then leaped back and, without even looking, took another slash at Gourry, who'd moved in on it! Had it tried a follow-up attack against me, Gourry most certainly would have run it through from behind. That had to be why it had changed targets.

Clang! When Gourry deflected the shaman's blow, it got around to his side. This time it was Gourry who leaped, getting a little distance from his opponent.

"Be careful, Lina! This guy's good!" he called.

Obviously, I'd pieced that together. I was already working on a spell chant.

Meanwhile, Gourry and the shaman sized each other up—and the shaman took the initiative! It raised its blade high and sliced down at Gourry. The big lug wavered over how to respond. With sword skills like his, he probably could have just eviscerated the thing... But would that be enough to finish a demon? His hesitation produced a moment's delay, and...

Cling! Gourry blocked the shaman's incoming sword. A second later, the shaman was on the move again! It used their swords' meeting point as a fulcrum as it leaped into the air—right over Gourry's head toward me! And then—

"Fireball!"

Bwoosh! My spell met the demon midair! Of course, a Fireball wouldn't hurt one of its kind, but the force of the explosion still sent it flying backward. The shaman landed some distance on the other side of Gourry and turned its face back toward us.

"Wait!" I shouted. The shaman was about to start up again, but it stopped at my call. "You're trying to kill us to eliminate witnesses, right?"

The shaman tilted its head and said nothing for a time. "That is correct. I must kill... all witnesses..."

"Then wouldn't it be better to run for now? That spell will have people swarming the scene any second now! Which means you're gonna have more witnesses than you can handle!"

I was afraid that it might just threaten to kill them all, but after a lengthy silence, the shaman leaped lightly off the ground and disappeared back through the busted second-story window.

"Did he give up?" Gourry whispered, his sword still drawn as he looked up at the shattered window. Just then...

Fwooom! There was a huge explosion from inside the room.

"So... what do we do?" Gourry asked the next afternoon over lunch at a restaurant.

"About what?"

"The thing yesterday when—"

"Hush!" I silenced him by shoving a fried chicken wing into his mouth, then cast a surreptitious glance at the tables around us. "Keep it down! Someone might hear you!"

He chewed on the chicken wing, swallowed, and lowered his voice. "So what? It's not like we did anything wrong... And the local authorities are searching for clues about what happened, so why can't we just tell them what we saw?"

Hahh... Gourry was being so short-sighted that I couldn't help but lament.

If you're smart, you've figured this one out already. That's right—after stumbling onto the attack, Gourry and I had fled the scene. My Fireball had

attracted all kinds of attention, as expected, and it turned into a whole hullabaloo with the local guards running around questioning people since early this morning. Obviously, it would be easy to come forward and tell them what we'd seen. But...

"What do you think would happen if we did that, Gourry?"

"...They'd appreciate it?"

Haaaaaaaahhhhh... My lamentations grew deeper.

"Enlighten me here... Just what do you think that thing we fought yesterday was?" I had to ask.

"A demon, right? It felt like one."

"Right. I thought so too, though it seemed pretty dumb as demons go... and using an explosion for a cover-up isn't a very demon-like thing to do... But anyway, the victim was killed in his nightgown, and the room where he was staying got blown up—meaning the authorities don't really have a way to identify him. Now, let's assume we came clean to them about what we witnessed yesterday. They'd have an explosion at a local inn, an unidentified corpse, and a blood-stained sorcerer and her mercenary buddy at the scene crying, 'A demon did it.' Here's a question for you: What do you think the authorities would do with all that on their hands?"

"...Thank us for our cooperation?"

"Yeah, right! They'll look at the suspicious duo—that's us, just so we're clear—and say, 'A demon, huh? Likely story! I bet you did it yourselves!' Then they'll arrest us and won't listen to another word we say."

"Yeah? But once we explain the misunderstanding, I'm sure they'd let us go."

I clicked my tongue and waggled my finger. "Don't be naive. When a case is hard to crack, the authorities just want to arrest the first suspect they find so they can feel like they accomplished something. It's human nature. I did it all the time back in the day myself."

"You did?"

"Besides, even if we eventually clear things up, how much time gets wasted in the process? Remember how back in Solaria, despite all identities being known and the course of events being rather self-evident, we still had to spend a million years rehashing our story for everybody and their brother? Wait... I guess you wouldn't remember that, would you?"

"Um... actually..." Gourry slumped. "I don't remember the name of the city... but I do remember the questioning."

Huh. So it had been that bad even for him, had it?

"Good. Now, we're total strangers here and the identity of the victim is unknown. How long do you think it'd take the authorities to peg the deceased and then establish that we have no connection to him? Besides, say we *do* give our full testimony from yesterday. You think that'd really help things? If

the authorities start looking into us, that's just going to waylay the real investigation—which isn't good for them *or* us. So I say our best move is to look the other way and skip town ASAP!"

"Is that really okay?"

"Of course it is!" It really wasn't. "So we're staying out of this. You follow, Gourry?"

The big lug just shrugged in response.

Still, I'm betting we haven't seen the last of that demon. We have a terrible track record when it comes to unfinished business... With that thought, I let out another internal sigh.

"A white... giant?" I couldn't help but scowl openly at the bizarre story I'd just heard.

Gourry and I had left the city behind a day ago to hear from witnesses in a small village that was recently attacked by a demidemon swarm. Given that status quo, I found it rather odd that the place seemed more or less untouched and that the villagers were going about their lives as normal. A bearded older gent had agreed to talk to us at the local tavern in exchange for the price of a meal.

"That's right. The handful of mercenaries we hired for protection started shouting and ran into town. We came out to see a mess of demons coming out of the forest to the south," he said, gesturing pointlessly as he spoke. "I've never seen a demon before... Looked like real bad news to me. I thought I was a goner, for sure."

"But didn't you hire the mercenaries to protect you?" Gourry asked.

The old man just shook his head. "Well, I think there were about a hundred of the things..."

"A hundred?!" I gasped.

"Yeah. And however strong the mercenaries might've been, there were only a handful of them. They didn't stand a chance, so they just raised the alarm about the demons coming, then scarpered. Can't say I blame them. We all thought we were done for, running around like chickens with our heads cut off..."

"And that's when the white giant appeared?"

"That's right. Oh, could I get more of the fried romarl?"

"Sure thing. Ma'am! Get this man another fried romarl fish plate! And I'll have three more fried sampler platters, lunch combo C, and a special salad on the side!"

"Oh, and I'll take one order each of the crown sausage, bacon, potatoes, and eggs, as well as lunch combos A through C!"

“Hey, Gourry, don’t think I didn’t notice you slipping in those orders! Two can play at that game! I’ll take the roast lamb, the fish liver terrine, and the duck egg soup too! Anyhoo, now what’s this about a white giant?”

“Th-That about-face gave me whiplash. Anyway... the demons were about to attack when suddenly the whole place lit up.”

“It lit up?”

“Well, it’s like... there was a flash. It blew the demons away in an instant.”

“Huh?”

“I said it blew away the demons. There were plenty left, but something was burning nearby—not sure if it was the trees—and I could see the giant a little ways away.”

I didn’t quite know how to react to this information, but the old man kept talking nonetheless.

“It looked about the size of a big hill, I’d say, and it was white all over. While I watched, the giant released two or three more of those flashes and blew the rest of the demons away. The demons tried to fight back with their fiery arrows, but they didn’t seem to hurt the giant. If you ask me, it’s got to be a mountain god.”

“I see...” I replied vaguely to the old man’s story.

Even if the lesser and brass varieties were the lowest branch of the demon family tree, the idea of something blowing away a hundred of them with just a few blasts... It certainly didn’t sound believable. Then again, plenty of what Gourry and I had been through would sound that way to a stranger too. Plus, when we’d first arrived in town, we’d seen the remnant scorch marks of a battle at the village entrance—huge trenches gouged out of the earth, their walls melted into smooth glass. I knew that no human could do that, so I’d been curious about their origin. Were they traces of the giant’s attack?

But what the hell is this giant?

“Could you tell me more about how the demons or the giant behaved when they appeared?”

“I’m not sure what more I can say...” The old man screwed up his face thoughtfully. “The giant vanished right away, and the other villagers just watched from afar like I did. They don’t know any more than me, I’d wager.”

“Hmm... What about the mercenaries, then? I bet they’d know more about how the demons appeared, if not the giant.”

“I told you, they made tracks before it all went down. We never saw them again, even after the demons were gone. Not that they were obligated to come back.”

“Do you have any idea where they’d have gone, then? Well, I guess you wouldn’t...”

“I don’t. But I do wonder...”

“Wonder what?”

“I heard that Gyria City’s been recruiting mercenaries in large numbers. Maybe that’s where they went.”

“Bugh!” I couldn’t help but groan when I heard that name.

The afternoon sun gently bathed the landscape. Birdsong drifted from the forest to my right, and from my left came the sounds of flowing water—probably a small river just outside of view.

Hahh... I sighed wistfully, gazing glassy-eyed at the peaceful scene around us.

“What’s wrong, Lina?” Gourry asked.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” I responded listlessly.

“You’ve been super down since we left that village. What’s up?”

“Oh... that,” I said with another small sigh. “It’s what that villager said... about how Gyria City was recruiting mercenaries and we should check things out there...”

“What about it?”

“I’ve just got... bad memories of Gyria, you know?” I said with a melancholy air. I’d gotten mixed up in some... let’s say... complicated trouble there once before.

Gourry, however, just smiled brightly at me. “Oh, is that all? That’s not like you.”

“‘Is that all’?! Who would be happy about revisiting a city they have bad memories of?”

“Well, come on. Is there any city you have *good* memories of?”

“Grk!”

“See? If you let that get you down, you’ll be depressed for the rest of your life. Just let it roll off your back!” he said cheerfully and patted me on the shoulder.

You know... whatever, man. You’re not helping!

“Anyway. Just sighing won’t—” Gourry began, then suddenly halted in place.

“Hmm? What’s—” I turned back, about to ask what was wrong, when I realized it for myself. There was a faint presence lurking deep in the forest beside us.

This is...

Before I could even finish my thought, the presence was right on top of us! Gourry drew his sword and I began chanting a spell. A figure leaped out at us from the shadows of the underbrush. Gourry deflected a silent incoming slash with his blade. Our attacker then jumped away, out into the middle of the main road as if to block our path.

Oh, this thing again...

I didn’t know the creature’s name, so I’d taken to calling it “Shaman.”

“Now... there will be... no more witnesses...” it said.

Then it dashed straight at Gourry! *Clang!* Just as their swords collided...

“Skree!” Shaman let out a cry like a raptor.

Two things happened at the same time: Gourry instinctively leaped back, and a dozen arrows of flame appeared where he’d been standing. They fired, streaking toward him! While continuing to rush back, he dodged some and knocked aside the others.

While this was unfolding, I released a spell of my own! “Zellas Bullid!” The beam of light it produced could change course midair to track its opponent, and it was powerful enough to take out most demons in one hit.

“Hraaagh!” Shaman let out another wail. A small, thin shield of light appeared beside it to block my spell.

Ha, silly demon! My beam of light shattered its shield! *I win!*

Or so I was thinking—but then Shaman effortlessly slipped out of the way to dodge by a hair.

Bwuh? My attack hooked back around for Shaman, but the thing once again summoned a shield of light and dodged when it shattered. By this point, Gourry had dealt with all the flaming arrows and was ready to get back in action, but he couldn’t exactly jump in under the current circumstances. Shaman repeated the same shield-dodge play two, then three times, and... *Plink!* My beam of light, at last sufficiently weakened, poofed out of existence as it pierced the last shield.

No way...

I couldn’t help my astonishment. I’d seen demons tank my blasts and come out none the worse for wear. I’d even seen them evade them by shifting to the astral plane. But... this was my first time seeing one combine physical skill and minor defensive magic to neutralize a spell. Obviously, such a feat was much easier said than done. Shaman had dodged each of my beam’s passes by the skin of its teeth. I’d underestimated the creature when we first met, taking it for a silly, third-rate demon... But it might be one tough cookie after all.

Shaman turned its face toward me.

“Hyah!” At the same time, Gourry stepped in with a cry and a slash.

Shaman deflected the blow and unleashed a counterattack, which Gourry blocked with his blade on the backswing. Perhaps realizing that another round of flaming arrows wouldn’t be any more effective a second time, Shaman seemed intent to lock Gourry into a swordfight.

Obviously, I wasn’t about to interfere. If I started chucking spells willy-nilly, I’d wind up nailing Gourry. I could charge in with my own sword to draw Shaman’s attention, but at my level of skill, it was more likely that I’d just get in Gourry’s way. I was basically stuck watching from the sidelines.

Still, it was clear that we wouldn't get anywhere like this. I needed a way to launch a spell into the fray without hurting my swordsman buddy...

Of course! I drew my sword and began a chant, then dashed at the two of them. Both noticed my approach and turned their attention to me.

"It's not safe, Lina! Stop!" Gourry cried.

I ignored him and pressed my charge. Just before I reached them, I changed course, got around behind Gourry, and grabbed him by the hair!

"What?!"

Then I incanted my words of power—"Lei Wing!"

Thanks to my amplified fast flight spell, we sped away from Shaman. I turned back and saw the creature first stare into space in confusion, then break into a dash.

"Ow, ow, ow! Are we running away, Lina?!"

"Heck no! That thing's already on our tail!"

Once we'd gotten sufficient distance, I set us down and dismissed my spell. Before Gourry could complain about me yanking his hair, I got behind him again and leaped up onto his back.

"H-Hey..."

Ignoring his attempt to protest, I began chanting another spell.

"Oh, I get it..." At last realizing what I was up to, Gourry turned to intercept Shaman's imminent approach.

That's right. I'd only fled in order to buy me time to chant a new spell. I was going to fire it from Gourry's back—meaning there was no way I'd hit him! I'd then jump down after I fired so that even if the spell missed, Gourry could immediately press the offensive. There was just one flaw with this plan: it looked awful silly!

I'd judged the distance perfectly, though. By the time Shaman entered Gourry's sword range, I'd already finished my spell. He blocked Shaman's strike with one of his own. I could only assume the demon was on guard for close-range magic. It could potentially dodge this no matter how abruptly I unleashed it, so I was biding my time for now.

Gourry and Shaman's swords clashed again.

Not yet...

Then a third time.

No, not y— I started to tell myself, but reevaluated.

"Bram Blazer!" I released the blue light at close range, and it consumed Shaman along with its sword!

"Graaaah!" Shaman's scream echoed through the surrounding area.

Yes!

The blue light was a shock wave that also dealt spiritual damage to an opponent. Normally it wouldn't do much against a demon, but I'd

supercharged this one with my amplification chant. It wasn't going to be a one-hit takedown, though it should definitely smart!

Except, as I was thinking that, Shaman freaking *sliced the light in two*!

"What?!" I squeaked, so shocked I forgot to hop off of Gourry's back.

Shaman's sword had cut my spell right in half. It was likely that earlier howl wasn't one of pain, but an incantation. It had cast some kind of spell on its sword, allowing it to cut through mine. Perhaps Shaman had still taken some damage in the process... but if it had, it wasn't much. As if to attest to this, once it was done cleaving the blue light, it readied its sword again.

"Dam Blas!"

Clink! Just then, an attack spell struck Shaman's sword from the side and shattered it! Shaman leaped back.

"Tch... Missed," hissed a familiar voice from the patch of forest where the spell had originated.

"Looks like we just can't get enough of each other," I said breezily.

"Yeah, it's like a curse," Luke responded in a truly sour tone.

Three people emerged from the woods. First was the dour-eyed, raven-haired Luke in his swordsman's garb; second was the subdued, silver-haired Mileena. We'd been involved in incidents with these two twice before, but this time, they had a dark-haired man with them. He looked about twenty and was also dressed like a fighter, with a broadsword hanging from his hip.

Never seen this guy before. Although... Wait, nah. Bigger fish to fry here...

I looked back and saw Shaman looking carefully between its broken sword and the new trio on the scene. At least, I assumed that was what it was doing... I mean, it wasn't like the thing had eyes!

"I thought you were fighting an ordinary assassin, but I see I was mistaken," Mileena said calmly, her eyes on Shaman.

Luke nodded. "Yeah. This guy don't seem human to me." He then drew his sword and leveled it at the demon.

Shaman turned its face toward Luke and the others. "More... witnesses?" it whispered in an almost wondrous tone. It tilted its head for a while as if thinking something over, then... suddenly leaped away and disappeared into the forest. I could hear the tramping on grass grow more distant as I sensed its presence moving away.

"Huh..." I remarked.

"The damn thing ran away!" Luke shouted.

I wasn't sure if Shaman had realized it was at a disadvantage or if it had simply fled because it got confused and couldn't decide what else to do. I didn't know what to make of the disparity between its quick thinking in battle and its sluggishness otherwise... But for now, at least, it seemed safe to assume that the battle was over.

Luke apparently reached the same conclusion, sheathed his sword, and turned his gaze on me. “Looks like you got wrapped up in more weird crap, huh? Say, I gotta ask you somethin’...”

“How about I save the explanation for the nearest village?” I proposed.

But Luke clicked his tongue and wagged his finger at me. “That ain’t what I meant.”

“What is it, then?”

“I meant... how long are you two gonna play piggyback?”

“I told you, it was a strategy!”

“Okay, I get it. You got on his shoulders for strategic purposes and liked how it felt, so you stayed there. Mmhmm. I can just see how close you two are. It was perfect—like a spirit and the possessed.”

We’d stopped at an eatery in the closest town and put in our orders. Luke had yet to shut up about my piggyback ride, and I could feel a vein throbbing in my forehead.

“Nnnngh... You need to drop this one, buddy.”

“Tease ’em while the teasin’s good. That’s my motto.”

“What’s wrong with a piggyback ride? Shouldn’t we talk about—”

“Shut up, Gourry. Well, Luke, that’s quite a motto you’ve got! It sure explains why Mileena’s so sick of you.”

“Geh?! Wh-What’re you talkin’ about?! Mileena always says, ‘That’s what I love best about you—’”

“I never say that,” Mileena interrupted, expression unchanged.

“Ha! See?”

“Hey, Lina...”

“I told you to stuff it, Gourry. I’m getting to the good part!”

“The good part?”

“Snerk! Luke’s got a one-sided crush on Mileena and he follows her around everywhere against her will!”

“Y-You shut up! Get it straight, okay? Mileena’s my—”

“Your what?” It was Mileena, not I, who cut him off cold. Luke went abashedly silent. Before he could say anything else, Mileena turned to me. “Now, who was that man you were fighting? His presence suggested a demon, but...” She sounded a bit doubtful.

There was a lot about Shaman that didn’t seem demonic. The fact that it was wielding a sword that could be broken with a Dam Blas, its slow reactions... I could understand why Mileena had questions about its nature, but its aura definitely said “demon” to me. I’d met demon fusions—syntheses of human and demon—before, and this was totally different. Shaman actually had the kind of cold hostility that your brass demon-level creatures emit. I guess, at the very least, it couldn’t be a very high-ranking demon...

“I don’t know exactly what it is either. This shouldn’t take too long to explain, but two nights ago— Ah!” I unconsciously cried out.

It had finally clicked. The man traveling with Luke and Mileena... I’d never met him before, but his face was naggingly familiar, and I’d just realized why. He looked like the man Shaman had killed that night. Not a dead ringer, just... similar. Brothers, maybe?

“What is it?” Mileena asked bluntly.

“Oh... nothing,” I said hesitantly as I sipped at my qaran juice. The resemblance could just be a coincidence, after all, and I could always ask him about it after I heard his story. “Anyway, two nights ago, that creature... I don’t know its name, so I’m just calling it Shaman. I happened upon it right after it had killed someone. Since then, it’s been after us, claiming it has to kill witnesses. The guy it killed was in his nightgown and staying at an inn, and Shaman blew up his room right after... so I still don’t know who he was, but...” With that, I cast a glance at the man accompanying Mileena and Luke.

“You want to know about him? He’s our current employer,” Mileena said, interpreting the gesture as the cue to introduce him. She then shared a look with Luke.

Luke nodded slightly. “Sorry for the late introduction. This is Jade, um...”

“Caudwell. Jade Caudwell,” the man muttered in response to Luke’s prompting.

There was something palpably somber in his voice and expression. He sounded like a man going through some *serious* stuff.

“Truth is, there’s some pretty weird shit going down right now in Dils’s capital, Gyria City. He went to inform the local lords, ’cept none of ’em would talk to him. But he ran into us and spilled the whole story,” Luke explained without my asking.

“H-Hang on a minute here,” I had to insist. “Are you sure you wanna tell us all this? You’re not trying to drag us into it, are you?”

“Just hear me out. A while back... About a year now, I guess? I’m bettin’ you’ve heard about it. There was this big, mysterious fire in Gyria. The whole place and its army ended up in ruins.”

“Yeah, I’m aware...”

“The city’s finally back on its feet... The army not so much. After all, even if you hire new recruits, it takes ’em a while to train into proper soldiers, right? So they’ve been recruitin’ mercenaries to bolster up their forces quick.”

“I do feel like I heard about that somewhere...” Gourry said, chewing on a baguette sandwich he’d ordered as an appetizer. It was like he’d forgotten he was a mercenary himself or something...

“Well, one of the mercenaries was head an’ shoulders above the rest. The king decided he liked ’em and promoted ’em in a hurry, and now there ain’t a thing that happens in the kingdom without their say-so. Things’ve been weird ever since.”

“Yeah, you sometimes see ambitious types like that zooming up the ranks,” I said as if it wasn’t my problem in the slightest...

Which, I mean, it wasn’t! This person was upending the kingdom’s status quo, and Jade was probably asking the local lords to do something about it, but I could see why none of them would be willing to tackle the task. This is what the big brains like to call an “internal affair.” No lord was going to poke their nose into an issue that thorny. I sure as hell wouldn’t. So... while I didn’t know whether it was Luke or Mileena who’d accepted the job, either way, it was kinda odd that they would.

As if Luke read my mind, he said, “If I’m honest, I didn’t wanna get involved either at first. I changed my mind when he told me the new bigshot mercenary was a gal named Sherra.”

“What?!” The name drew an involuntary shout from my throat.

Not so long ago, Gourry, Luke, Mileena, and I had thrown down with Sherra, the General in service to Dynast Graushera and wielder of the demonic sword Dulgoffa. I’d managed to improvise a way to get her off our backs at the time, but...

Mind you, it was possible that this was a completely different person with the same name. Given how we knew that General Sherra was already actively scheming in the vicinity, though, it seemed safe to assume it was her and that she was up to no good here as well. Speculatively speaking, she also might be

the one behind the current demidemon spawnings. The timeline on that and her most recent mischief matched up too well. But what was her motive? And what was she up to in Gyria City now?

"No one knows what she's plannin', of course," Luke said gravely. He then indicated Jade with his eyes. "From what he's said about her, the name ain't just a coincidence. She's *that* Sherra for sure. Which means she's got more on her mind than a cushy castle post. Jade says his dad was a general in the royal army, an' he kept tellin' the king she was bad news, but he wouldn't freakin' listen. And then the chief retainers opposin' Sherra started disappearin' one after another. So his dad decided to get word out to the local lords..."

"And sent him as the messenger?" I asked.

Jade nodded. "I visited several local lords, but they all rejected my petition, saying it wasn't a matter they were fit to deal with. And... it's true. When I try to explain it, it really does sound like pure internal politics. Except... something about it feels... wrong."

"How so?" I prompted.

Jade frowned uncertainly. "That's... difficult to articulate. This feels like more than some mere power struggle. It just... smells different."

"Smells different, huh? Good instincts, bud," Luke put in.

"Er?" Jade asked, confused.

His mercenary companion waved his hand dismissively. "Ah, we'll explain later. Anyway, keep goin'."

"Right. I believe my brother was also sent out with my father's petition... but I suspect he fared no better than I did."

"Your brother?" I looked up. "You mean there was a messenger besides you?"

"Yes, there was. Why do you ask?"

Was I supposed to tell him, or not? It could have been a total coincidence, after all...

"I might be barking up the wrong tree here... Just stay calm and hear me out, okay? The man I mentioned earlier that was killed by Shaman... He looked a lot like you."

There was a considerable silence. Then, seeming to realize what I was getting at, Jade cast his eyes downward.

"Er, of course, it's possible that I'm imagining the resemblance and it was somebody else. It happened in a city one day's travel south of here... Want to go check?" I asked.

The man remained silent for a while, then shook his head slowly. "No... if it's not my brother, it would be a waste of time. And if it is... all the more reason for me to return to Gyria as quickly as possible with help."

"Okay. Got it." Unsure of what else to say, I just nodded my acceptance.

In the silence that followed, I felt someone tug on my cape. I looked over and found Gourry staring at me, clearly hoping for an explanation.

"So, it sounds like," I said, scratching my head, "there's real bad news going on in Gyria City, and we need to figure out if we should go there or not."

"Oh. You should've said that from the start," he replied cheerfully.

Hmm. Guess he wasn't following the convo at all...

"Er..." Jade started to look worried.

Luke waved his hand again. "Ah, don't worry. He's just that kind of guy."

"I see..."

"So, are we going to Gyria City, Lina?" Gourry asked.

"Yeah, we are," I answered confidently.

I couldn't look the other way after everything I'd heard.

The trip to Gyria City was eerily uneventful. Of course, this is the part where I add, "so far."

We didn't forget to ask the people in the towns we stopped at along the way about any demon swarming incidents they'd been party to. Of course, since we were trying to make good time, we were doing a pretty half-assed job of it. Every now and then we'd hear another story of the so-called "white giant," but nothing they could tell me really clarified what it was or what it had to do with anything. But even more worrying than that...

"It's weird he hasn't attacked us since then," Gourry muttered as we were enjoying a late dinner four days out from Gyria City.

We were in the kind of eatery-slash-bar you'd find in any little town. It was well past dinnertime, but plenty of people had come to drink, so the place was plenty packed.

"Who hasn't?" Luke asked insufferably, apparently blind to my careful ignoring of Gourry's comment.

"You know, the demon in black who attacked me and Lina before," the big lug continued.

"Do you mean the one you called Shaman?" Mileena chimed in.

Guh!

"It's true that we haven't seen it for some time. Is it possible it gave up?" Jade added.

You guys! Come on!

"What do you think, Lina?" Gourry inquired.

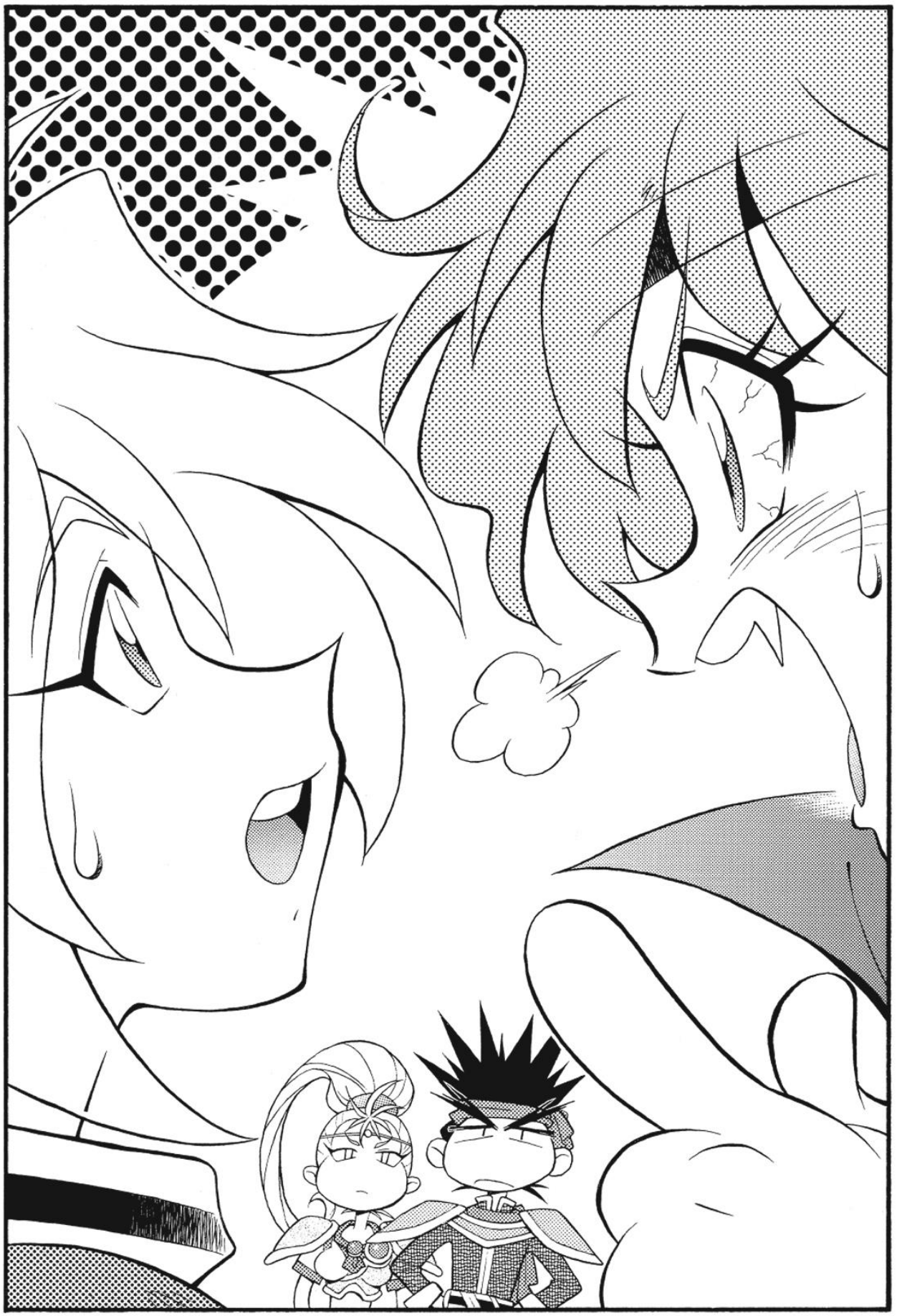
"Don't ask me, damn it!" I shouted without meaning to.

Everyone looked at me in surprise.

"Hey, Lina. Where'd that come from?"

"Aaargh! Don't you know how these things work?! When you say 'that demon hasn't attacked us in a while,' that's precisely when the demon attacks! It's a law of the universe!"

“I-Is it really?”
“Yes! That’s why I’m decidedly attempting to avoid the subject!”
“Oh, don’t be stupid. There’s no way—”



Fwoom! The sound of a distant explosion interrupted Luke's words, and everyone but me looked around in shock.

Told ya!

"H-Hey! You gotta be kiddin' me..." Luke grumbled, starting to rise.

Just then, the shop's door flew open. A man burst in, stumbling over himself in his haste. "Everyone, it's an emergency! Demons! Heading for the city!" he yelled hoarsely, slamming his hands onto a nearby table to right himself.

A commotion broke out among the people in the bar, followed by—*Fwoom!*—another distant explosion.

Not Shaman, but a demidemon swarm?!

"Oh, hey. Different demons, then."

"That's no reason to relax back into your chair, Gourry! It's still a big deal! C'mon!"

Luke, Mileena, and Jade, not needing my orders, had already headed out the door. Gourry and I ran out of the bar after them and found the people of the city running around in a panic.

"I can't even tell which way the demons're comin' from!" Luke spat, annoyed.

The townspeople were in the grips of hysteria, which made it impossible to glean the information we needed. I wanted to grab someone and ask, but there was no guarantee I'd get a correct answer. And so...

"Levitation!" Before I could begin my chant, Mileena cast her own flight spell to ascend over the roof of the bar. She took a look around and then immediately returned.

Getting a bird's-eye view... It seemed we'd had the same idea.

"This way," she reported, landing cleanly and taking off running.

We followed after her.

"We'll use the back alleys," Mileena declared, and we dove into the nearest one to avoid the masses.

It was a good call. Cutting through a panicked crowd was never easy. We turned right and left through the empty alleyways, all five of us in a line, until...

"?!"

When we came back out onto the main avenue, Mileena stopped. I ran out right behind her. And we saw... nobody at all. The street looked completely deserted.

"Are you sure this was the right way? We didn't take a wrong turn?" Jade asked.

"Don't be stupid. My Mileena's got a perfect sense of direction!" Luke protested in response, subtle self-interest and all. (Typical.)

“I’m not yours,” Mileena objected, putting him in his place. (Also typical.)

“This is more than just going the wrong way,” I murmured. “The noise is completely gone.”

“Ah!” Jade cried out, apparently just now noticing that.

Indeed, the panicked voices we’d been hearing all this time had stopped entirely.

Jade looked around in a fluster, as perhaps this was his first experience with the phenomenon. “Wh-What’s going on here?!”

“It’s a barrier,” I responded.

“Exactly,” a new, deep voice replied.

2: The Shadows Lurking in Gyria

"What's that?" Jade whispered, turning his eyes to a narrow alley some distance away.

Yeah... Guess it's a pretty bizarre sight to someone who's never seen one of those *before.*

The figure, clad in a tattered black cape, was more or less humanoid... but anyone could tell that this thing *wasn't* human. The skin that covered its haggard—rather, abnormally wiry—body had the darkening of a necrotic corpse. Its face had no ears, nose, mouth, or hair, just two exceptionally large, wide-open eyes gazing glassily in our direction.

"That would be... a pure demon, yeah," I muttered in response.

Unlike demidemons—brass demons and lesser demons—which had to possess and transmogrify animals in order to manifest in our world, pure demons could manifest here entirely under their own power. Needless to say, that meant they were a heck of a lot stronger than demidemons.

"It's warped space itself to trap us here," I explained.

"Ohh. Very knowledgeable of you," the thing said, impressed with—or perhaps mocking—me.

"Well, I've been around the block a few times. But you didn't come here to make small talk, did you?"

"Certainly not. My business with you is even more trivial than that..." The bug-eyed demon began to walk down the avenue with a gliding gait. "I'd just like to ask you to die."

"Get back, Jade. Normal swords can't hurt this thing. And... be careful. It's probably not the only enemy here."

"Impressive insight. Come, you two!"

Two? As the bug-eyed demon called out, I felt a wave of hostility cast in my direction. *One's... above!*

Before I could even look up, Gourry had his sword out of its sheath. Talk about déjà vu!

Zing! I heard a hard ringing sound over my head. A moment later, the attacker landed on the street in front of me, then leaped back to put space between us.

Shaman... I knew it! Indeed, I'd expected that much, but... another hostile aura was now emerging from an alley opposite where Bug-Eyes had appeared. It was about as tall as a human and held swords in both hands. It was all black, like Shaman, but it had an entirely different upstairs situation going on. It wasn't that it had a different face—more that it didn't even have

anything *resembling* a face. Where a head would normally be, it instead had a set of long, thin protrusions, almost like serpent heads, each about as thick as a child's wrist. It was like someone had transplanted a small hydra onto the thing's neck.

"Three of them?!" Mileena shouted out in a rare show of nerves.

Bug-Eyes let out a low laugh. "Well, three superior beings does seem a bit much to take out a mere five human rats... but orders are orders."

"Would those orders be from Sherra, then?" I asked calmly.

He narrowed his eyes. "Just who are you, scum?"

"Someone you prooobably shouldn't be calling scum..."

"I don't know how much you know... but it seems I really must dispose of you!" He swung his right hand as he spoke, producing spears of miasma midair—which he released in our direction! We all immediately scattered to dodge.

"Gourry, take Shaman! Luke, Mileena, you two get Hydra! I'll handle Bug-Eyes!"

"That ain't up to you!" Luke argued, albeit while following orders and dashing toward the demon I'd dubbed Hydra.

With a battle cry, Gourry slashed at Shaman. And then...

"My name is Rebifor!" raged the bug-eyed demon as I charged him, chanting under my breath. "I applaud your courage in facing me alone! But do not give me such a trivializing name!" His left hand flashed forward as he chastised me, sending a black blade my way!

I dodged to the side while unleashing my spell: "Elemekia Lance!"

"Fool!" Rebifor swept it away with his left hand. "You can't harm me like that!"

Looking slightly shaken, I drew the sword at my waist, then picked up chanting and resumed closing in on my foe. I dodged another miasma spear he fired and dove in close, thrusting as I did! The strike sunk deep into Rebifor's side. The demon's eyes narrowed in the suggestion of a smile.

“Fool! Didn’t I tell you? That won’t wor—”

Before he could finish, I incanted, “Astral Vine!” The spell infused my sword with magic!

“Gaaaaah!” Rebifor screamed as he leaped back and away. I’d probably done some damage, but that wasn’t enough to kill him. “Curse you!” He glowered at me after gaining his distance.

Seemed he’d finally put it together. My initial simplistic attack, combined with my rattled demeanor, was all a ploy to get his guard down. I locked eyes with Rebifor, whose gaze was now cautious. While gauging distance and positioning, I began chanting again.

“Elemekia Lance! Luke! Mileena!” With my eyes still locked on Rebifor, I unleashed my spell—at Hydra!

Fortunately, my shouting was enough to get Luke and Mileena diving out of the way. Despite being blindsided, Hydra managed to evade too, but the act left the demon off-balance...

“Bram Blazer!”

“Fell Zaleyd!”

...allowing Luke and Mileena to blow it away with a good ol’ one-two combo!

“Gkh!” Rebifor shot a hostile glare in my direction. “Withdraw!” he cried, sliding backward into the alley. He must have realized he was at a disadvantage.

Shaman, still clashing with Gourry, also tumbled back in retreat at Rebifor’s call.

“They’re getting away!” Jade shouted.

“It’s not safe to pursue,” I said calmly in response. It would certainly save us trouble down the line to give chase and defeat them now, but... “We’re still inside their barrier, so we’d never be able to catch them. More likely, they’d divide our forces and pick us off.”

Rebifor and Shaman had been unlucky to lose Hydra out of the gate, but they wouldn’t be so cavalier the next time we crossed paths. *We’d* be the unlucky ones if we underestimated them.

“But then how do we get out of this barrier, Lina?” Gourry asked.

“It’ll probably dispel itself once Rebifor leaves it. The question is what comes after that. The next time we fight them, they’ll probably be more prepar—”

I was interrupted by the abrupt return of the hustle and bustle of the city. The avenue, empty moments ago, was suddenly brimming with people. It looked like Rebifor’s barrier had been lifted.

“Huh. Guess you were right,” Luke remarked.

“But we still have work to do,” Mileena added.

Though it should have looked like we'd appeared out of thin air to the people around us, nobody batted an eye. This stood to reason—they had bigger things to worry about. We'd driven Rebifor and his goons away, but there was still a whole demidemon horde to handle. We swiftly took off down the road, tearing through the crowd...

And then, all five of us came to a stop at once. We'd hit the plaza at the city's northern entrance, lined with empty stalls and shops and otherwise devoid of people. Beyond the gate, we could see a writhing mass of figures pouring down the road toward town.

"No way..."

"Those are all..." someone said hoarsely as we stood there.

They were far enough away that I couldn't say exactly how many there were, but it was definitely more than you could count on your fingers... and toes.

"Wh-What do we even do? I'm thinkin' this crowd might be more trouble than those pure demons..." Luke whispered, staring blankly.

As for me, however... "Hah! It might mess up the road, but I'll blast 'em all away before they even reach us!" I said, moving straight into a chant.

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

That's right, time to whip out the ol' Dragon Slave! Numbers were no object when it came to blowing up bottom-feeding demons with this puppy! Except...

"Hey, what's that white thing?" Gourry suddenly asked.

Just then, I saw a flash. And in that moment...

"What?!" I cried, so alarmed that I dropped my chant. There was a flash in the distance, and all the demons around it went flying.

"What was that?!" Luke shouted.

"What happened?!" Mileena followed.

Gourry, who had the best vision of us all, could apparently see what was going down, but the rest of us were in the dark.

"I'm going to try to get closer!" I said, dashing out before anyone could respond.

While I was running, the light pulsed a second time, then a third. Each flash mowed through more demons. And then...

I don't know how far I'd gotten before I finally stopped in my tracks, silent. By then, there was barely any of the demon swarm left to fight.

Kra-pash! Light audibly ripped through the air, and even more demons were blown away. The source of the blasts tearing up the ground and demons alike was...

"Is that... the white giant?" I muttered like a woman in a trance.

The villager we'd talked to earlier had described the white giant as a small mountain. That was clearly an exaggeration, but I couldn't fault the guy for using the word "giant" when it was definitely a good size bigger than the already hulking demidemons. Its white body glowed with a dazzling light. Its general shape was humanoid, but its head was half-sunk into its shoulders. It looked a little like an alabaster golem, if one sculpted with a lot of artistic license.

"Say, Lina... you ever seen anything like that before?" Gourry asked.

"Nope. Not as far as I can recall," I responded, still entranced.

The giant fired another blast of light from the palm of its outstretched right hand. More brass and lesser demons hit the ground. There was scarcely a sign of demon movement around us now. Without so much as a glance at its silently gawking audience (that is, us), the giant turned around and began to walk away.

"It's... It's leaving," Luke whispered.

Nobody responded. None of us knew how to react to what we'd just seen. If the giant was polishing off demons, it didn't appear to be an immediate threat. But that didn't mean it was safe to assume it was on our side either. At last, as we watched it go...

"Huh?"

The white giant literally vanished.

"What *was* that thing?!" Jade shouted, but no one knew what to tell him. If not for the demon corpses littering the ground around us, I would've said we were dreaming or hallucinating.

"Well, regardless... standing around here won't get us anywhere. Let's inform the townspeople that the danger has more or less passed," I proposed.

"True... Reassuring them comes first," Jade agreed.

"But I'm gonna say that *we* beat the demons and snag us a nice reward!"

"Hey, great idea!" Luke was on board. But...

"How dare you!" Jade objected. "That's fraud! We didn't do a thing!"

"Oh, but we did! We watched encouragingly as the giant did *its* thing!"

"Which provided no help whatsoever!"

"Grow up, man," Luke cut in. "Actions deserve rewards just as much as results do."

"But we didn't *act*! The fight was resolved entirely without us!"

"Sheesh... so argumentative."

"No, you are!"

Luke and I tried our best to persuade Jade, but either out of integrity or sheer bloody-mindedness, he refused to relent. He turned to Gourry and Mileena for backup. "Surely you agree with me! Please, say something!"

"Huh? Like what?" Gourry asked.

"Platitudes will only get you so far in this world," replied Mileena.

“Waaagh! Stop it!” Jade cried, cradling his head.

I could understand lamenting Mileena’s reaction, but it was definitely his bad for counting on Gourry.

“B-But I’m still a noble knight of Dils... I can’t be a party to such a sham,” he muttered, and at last stood up decisively. “Very well! Do as you like! However, I’m going to tell the people what really ha—”

“Sleeping.”

Thump! Zzzzz...

“Okay! With that settled, I’m gonna head back to town and spread the word!”

Leaving Jade in his magical slumber, I scurried off.

Cresting the hill brought into sight a metropolis surrounded by a wall—the capital of the Kingdom of Dils, Gyria.

“Home at last,” Jade said wistfully as he looked down at the distant city. He’d been a little testy since the demon attack for some reason, but the sight of his hometown was apparently enough to put him back in good spirits.

“Sorry to ruin the moment, but this ain’t the time to get nostalgic,” Luke said in a far grimmer tone as he stepped up next to Jade. “Makin’ it here means the real fight’s about to start.”

He was right. Rebifor and Shaman were undoubtedly acting on the orders of Sherra, who was here in this town. The fact that they hadn’t made a move on us since our last encounter suggested they were focusing their forces here in the city, ready to attack once we arrived.

Sherra alone was already a hell of an opponent to face. And while we were lucky to have made it this far, there was still no guarantee we’d come out on top. To be honest, part of me was still considering hightailing it outta here and pretending we’d never heard about any of this... But I knew that wasn’t a real option.

I couldn’t say exactly what was afoot, but if a General-class demon had her fingers in the pie, it was probably a lot scarier than your average kingdom hijack. If we passed on our chance to do something about it, there was zero possibility that it would just resolve on its own. We had to strike before it was too late.

I’d have appreciated some help, but the sorcerers’ council wouldn’t believe us if we told them. Two former traveling companions came to mind as potential allies, but one of them was way off in Saillune and the other was who-knows-where. We probably didn’t have time to track them down.

Well... guess we’ve just gotta do it, I thought to myself with a faint internal sigh as I and my four companions began heading down the hill... Down the road to Gyria City.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t allow you in,” the young soldier said awkwardly as he blocked our path with his halberd.

We’d just reached one of the gates set into the wall around Gyria.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” Jade asked, understandably stunned by this unwelcoming stance.

I probably don’t need to tell you that the purpose of having a big wall around a castle town like this was to protect it from outside invaders—rival kingdoms waging war, hordes of rampaging monsters, that sort of thing. Generally speaking, ordinary folk coming and going from a city didn’t undergo too much scrutiny. Enforcing excessive restrictions requires manpower, after all, and discourages trade and tourism, which creates stagnation in the economy. And indeed, even as the soldier blocked our way, we could see traveling minstrels, merchants, and others still pouring in.

Obviously, I’d expect blatantly suspicious characters and wanted criminals to be barred, but anyone who looked normal enough and had a plausible reason for entering the city should be good to go. Plus, at a time like this, I’d wager that even someone who *did* look kinda shady would still be allowed in as long as they claimed to be mercenaries responding to the call.

And yet we were denied entry, even with the local knight Jade in our company?

“This is absurd! I’m going to repeat myself... I am Jade Caudwell, knight of the second squadron of the Blue Knights of Gyria Palace, returning from a mission! I vouch for the four people traveling with me! Why is that not enough?!” Jade demanded, his voice rising.

But the soldier responded awkwardly, “Actually... I know who you are. That’s why I can’t let you in.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Those... were my orders.”

“Orders?”

“Yes... Regarding you and your brother Grya...”

“What are they?! Stop stammering and tell me!”

“Ah... well... you were stripped of your titles for going AWOL...”

“What?!”

“So... we were told not to let you in... even if you returned.”

Stripped of their titles and exiled?! That seemed excessively harsh, even to third parties like us, and the news was clearly an incredible shock to the man himself.

“Who... Who decreed that?!” he inquired.

“Well... it was...” The young soldier broke into a sweat under the gaze of the other soldiers around him. “General Allus...”

“General Allus?!” Jade sputtered angrily.

The soldier continued defensively, “Well, he said our liege authorized it... so I couldn’t exactly argue...” He was referring to the king, of course.

“Fine, then. It’s not your fault. If we can’t get in, we can’t get in... but could I ask you for a favor? Would you please pass on a message to my father, General Grancis Caudwell?”

“Well... actually...” The soldier fell into awkward silence again.

“What? Don’t tell me you were ordered not even to pass along messages on my behalf...”

“No, it’s just that General Grancis... He passed away... of illness.”

It was now Jade’s turn to fall into silence. He simply stood there, stunned.

The tavern that night was boisterous. The smell of alcohol filled the room, as did the bragging of drunkards, occasionally punctuated by raucous laughter. Our table was the only quiet one.

We were in the bar on the first floor of an inn in a small town next to Gyria. Its size was surprising given its proximity to the capital, but perhaps travelers rarely stopped in, instead choosing to make the last leg to the big city.

“So, I gotta ask...” Luke piped up around the time we finished eating our dinner, as if something had just occurred to him. “Just who is this General Allus guy? When his name came up this afternoon, you acted like you had a history...”

Jade took a sip of his radda wine, then responded, “He’s the leader of the Red Knights. I know it’s poor character to gossip, but I’ve never heard much good about him. They say he didn’t exactly come by his current position honestly, and he frequently locked horns with my proper-to-a-fault father. He’s also the one who first promoted Sherra and introduced her to our liege. Father believed he was trying to curry favor with the king.”

“Hmm... So a bad guy, is what you’re saying,” Luke summarized, taking a bite of fried pork. “What’s the plan now, Master Jade?”

“What do you mean?” Jade asked, his brow furrowing.

“You know. Dad gone, title gone, and now you’re locked out. Sounds like you don’t owe this kingdom nothin’ no more.”

Sheesh, dude! Have a little heart!

“All things bein’ equal, you still feel like you need to stop Sherra and fix things here? Even if it puts you in danger? I gotta be honest. Seems like it’d be easier to move somewhere else an’ find someone new to serve. How ’bout Zephilia? I hear good things about the queen there.”

Jade remained silent for a while, then downed the rest of his cup. “No... I still love my kingdom.”

“Gotcha,” Luke said, then poured Jade his next round.

“Moreover... I have my doubts,” Jade confessed after taking another drink. “For my father to die of illness at a time like this... That’s a little too convenient, don’t you think?”

“You suspect murder?” Mileena muttered. Jade nodded.

He had a point. General Allus was Jade’s father’s rival, and he’d also sponsored Sherra. General Grancis, suspicious, had sent his sons to seek the aid of local lords... and then kicked the bucket while they were gone. It was natural to suspect that either Allus or Sherra might resort to drastic measures to get him out of the way. And since the guy I pegged for Jade’s brother had been killed by Shaman, who was also presumably working for Sherra, I wouldn’t be surprised if his father had met a similar fate.

“If it’s true... then at the very least, I want to find out who did it.”

“All righty... Then our next step’s obvious. We gotta cook up a plan,” Luke announced.

“Yeah. We’re up against a pretty tough opponent, after all,” I said in agreement.

Of course, having a plan wouldn’t guarantee our victory. Silly name or not, Sherra was Dynast’s personal General. Now, when it comes to demons, sometimes there’s a wild disparity in strength between individuals sharing similar titles—like the Priest of the Beast having power equivalent to the General and Priest of the Dragon combined—but we’re still dealing with a totally different league than your average grunt-level demons. I’m talking “mountains to pebbles” different. Charging in with no plan at all would be suicide.

“First, let’s take stock of what we got. Three of us can use black or shamanistic magic. As for the other two...” Luke looked at Gourry first. “You guys said you were lookin’ for magic swords, right? Seemed like you found a pretty decent one in Solaria... Found a better one since?”

“No, he’s still using that one,” I responded for him. “It’s sharp, it’s durable, and it can deflect most spells. It also seems like it can do some damage to demons—but only *some*, so don’t expect any sure kills against a powerful foe.”

“Gotcha.” Luke thought for a minute. “Mine’s only on the upper end of decent, blade-wise, but it can absorb a single spell.”

“It can absorb a spell?!”

“Yeah. When I’m fightin’ normally, it’ll employ an effect similar to the spell it’s absorbed. So if you hit it with an Elemekia Lance in advance, that gives it the power to cut through demons.”

“That’s totally awesome!”

“I can also fire the stored spell. No need for a chant—I just will the sword to do it and it does. Pretty good for catchin’ someone off guard, but then it’s a normal sword again until it gets a new spell cast on it. That said, in either

case, the spell's less powerful than it would be straight from the caster's mouth. The main problem is, I don't have a great idea of how strong a spell the sword can really stand. So if I get desperate an' cast somethin' too powerful on it, it might just break altogether."

"Hmm..."

"So, how about we split up the magic swords between the two non-casters?"

"Good idea."

In other words, distribute our resources wisely. Without a blade capable of fighting demons, Jade had been sidelined during our fight against Rebifor. If we had to face greater numbers in the future, a helpless Jade would seriously weigh us down.

"Then how about if Jade takes Gourry's sword, and Gourry takes Luke's?" I proposed.

Mileena nodded in silent response.

"Er... you're all making it sound like demons are all we're going to fight," Jade cut in.

Luke paused our sword-swapping discussion in realization. "Oh... right, we ain't told him." He thought for a minute, then scratched at his cheek. "Let's see, how to put this... It's kind of a long story, but, uh... I'll be blunt. Sherra's a demon."

There was a moment of silence.

"Excuse me?" Jade asked, dumbstruck by this totally un-sugarcoated reveal.

"Like I said, she's a demon. Follows that she'd be surrounded by demons, right?"

"But... she just looks like an ordinary woman..."

"The stronger they get, the more human they appear. They also get better at concealing their demonic presences."

"Ah... is that how it works?" Jade asked vaguely, as if he didn't entirely believe us.

"Anyway, our first task is to get into the city... which I guess means we're hidin' out at your place, Master Jade," Luke proposed.

Jade looked unhappy about the idea. "But... my mother passed when I was young. If my father's dead and I'm exiled, then it's possible they've confiscated all my assets..."

"Oh, c'mon, it ain't like they'd tear the place down overnight. Anyway, step one is gettin' inside the city. We'll spend tonight restin' to build up our stamina, then really get rollin' on the plan tomorrow. You with me?" Luke asked.

We all nodded in agreement.

The ruckus in the bar had died down some time ago. The hours crept by in the stagnant darkness.

“Ah! I can’t sleep!” I shouted as I leaped out of bed, probably sometime around midnight.

At times like these, a warm meal would send me right to dreamland. I doubted the bar/restaurant downstairs was still open, but I nevertheless got dressed, left my room, and headed for the first-floor eatery. Despite my expectations of disappointment, I found the lights on as well as a certain compatriot...

“Mileena?”

Yup. The silver-haired mercenary was seated at a corner table, nursing her way through a bottle of wine.

“What are you doing here by yourself?” I asked. “Oh, hey, innkeep. Got anything hot to eat?”

“I could warm up what’s left of the stew.”

“Sure, sounds great.” I put in my order and sat down across from the bar’s only other patron. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“I suppose not...” she responded listlessly, taking another sip of her drink.

I couldn’t blame her. We’d be heading into Gyria City the following night, and since time was of the essence, we might end up going straight to the palace for a showdown with Sherra. Knowing we were about to pick a fight with the General of the Dynast, a serious business demon, wasn’t exactly conducive to R&R.

“Come to think of it... I don’t find myself in situations like this very often,” I admitted.

“Situations like what?” she asked.

“You know. Just us girls talking. Luke’s always with you, after all.”

“And Master Gourry is always with you.”

I scratched at the tip of my nose. “Well... he *does* call himself my guardian. That said, I’m the one who makes most of the money, so he’s more a gigolo than anything. You mind if I ask, Mileena, why you travel with Luke?”

Mileena was silent for a while, a smile hanging on the corners of her mouth. “Because I’m very awkward,” she replied enigmatically.

Um...

“You mean—” I started, then found myself turning around.

The dim restaurant interior, the lamp swaying from the ceiling, the dingy walls—everything looked exactly as it had before. I thought I’d felt a strange presence for a moment, though... Was it just my imagination?

“You didn’t imagine that,” Mileena interjected as if she’d read my mind. She then rose to her feet and put a hand on her sword. “The innkeeper has disappeared.”

I whipped around and saw she was right. The man who’d previously been visible beyond the counter in the kitchen was now nowhere to be seen. “Then do you think...”

She nodded in response. “We’re back inside a barrier.”

“Heh heh. You’ve certainly let your guard down. Or are you simply that confident?” A deep voice echoed through the dark room.

Where is he?! I looked all around and couldn’t see any sign of the intruder. I could sense his presence for sure, though.

“Heh heh heh... You can’t see me, can you? Humans are so pathetic. I wonder why Lady Sherra fears you so...”

Fwshhh... Accompanying the disembodied voice, I heard a sound like sand pouring in from somewhere.

Where is that coming from?! The center of the room...?

"The lamp!" I shouted.

Mileena looked up. The faint light cast by the lamp had begun to fall to the floor in a thin stream, like a ray of sun beaming down between clouds. As I watched, it started to expand and take a roughly humanoid silhouette. Two dark, empty eyes sat inside a head that seemed to be made of calcified luminescent moss.

"Do you see me now, humans? Remember my name. I am Gubagg, servant to General Sherra."

So it *was* a demon working for Sherra! Still, knowing this guy's employer didn't change our top priority—and by that, I mean beating his ass!

I had no intention of waiting until the moss-man finished assembling himself, so I released my spell immediately. "Dynast Blas!"

With a furious crackle, my magical lightning blasted the luminous figure away! *Nice!*

"It's not over yet!" Mileena cried.

For a minute, I didn't understand what she meant. I looked back at the pale figure and...

I was stunned into silence. I watched as my raging magical lightning was sucked into moss-man's gaping black eyes. Before long, the bolt was completely gone and Gubagg turned his gaze back at us.

"That won't work." There was a smile in his voice. "The eyes of Gubagg lead all things to void. As long as they work, you cannot defeat me... Do you see now?"

L-Lead things to void? Sounds like a certain golden-haired dark lord I know... But if Gubagg was on that level, he wouldn't be running errands for Sherra. He had to be using some kind of dimension-warping trick to send the power that hit him somewhere else. Either way, though, this was going to be a tough fight.

"We've sent assassins after your friends as well, granting you the mercy of killing you all together. Now, let me show you... my other power."

As Gubagg spoke—*Rustle*—something moved on the floor at his feet.

I looked in the direction of the sound and found myself at a loss for words. Gubagg's moss-like body was spreading out from his legs, eating away at whatever it touched. *Corrosion?!*

"Soon I will expand until I devour this entire barrier... including the filthy humans within!" Gubagg pronounced triumphantly.

All the while, the corrosion continued to spread, blocking the staircase to the second floor and the way to the front door. Not that going up the stairs or out the door would do much good inside a barrier space anyway...

Corrosion plus spell nullification, huh? It was true that most humans wouldn't stand a chance against this guy. Too bad I wasn't most humans! I

began to chant a spell. But—*Whoosh!*—before I could finish it, Mileena took off! She drew her sword and charged Gubagg.

What the heck is she doing?!

I didn't have time to stop her. She thrust her sword into the white moss eating through the floor!

"Fool! That won't work!"

Gubagg was right. The white moss wasn't inhibited at all. Rather, it began to creep up Mileena's blade. She quickly pulled her sword out and lifted it into the air, but sticky trails of the moss clung to it tenaciously.

Bad move, Mileena... Yet just as I thought that, Mileena made her next play! This time she jumped and rammed her sword into Gubagg's eye.

That won't work...

Gubagg was probably thinking the same thing. But before he could say it...

"Elemekia Flame!" A strike from close range enveloped his entire body!

Aha!

"Geh!" Gubagg let out a short scream.

Crick. There was a soft snapping noise at Mileena's feet as she landed. *Crick. Crackapop. Crickle.* It continued intermittently, until at last—*Ziiing!*—with a sound like crystal shattering, Gubagg's luminescent body collapsed in pieces.

Huh... nice one, Mileena.

She'd intentionally gotten part of Gubagg to cling to her sword, then shoved it into the demon's eye. Hitting him with an attack spell then meant that if he absorbed it into his eye, he'd be sucking his own body into the void at the same time, allowing the spell to hit him that way. In other words, Mileena had set Gubagg up to take the spell no matter how he responded.

Guess Gubagg's decision to intimidate us by monologuing about his abilities had been his undoing. Granted, I hadn't done much myself...

Mileena turned to face me. "What's wrong? You look disappointed."

I mean... I was hoping to hit him with my Ragna Blade and go, "Well? How do you like the taste of real void?" But, you know, whatever...

"Ah... It's nothing. Nothing at all," I said, feeling a little deflated nonetheless. I shook it off and looked around. "Is the barrier still active?" I whispered, and Mileena followed my eyes. The kitchen beyond the counter was still deserted.

"Does that mean someone else put it up?" she asked.

I nodded. "He said assassins were after the others too, right? Let's go, Mileena!"

We both nodded and made a beeline for the stairs, when...

"Excuse me! Ma'ams!" the innkeeper shouted from behind us.

Huh? We turned to see him emerging from the kitchen, holding a bowl of stew.

“It’s ready,” he called.

“Oh... um...” Mileena and I shared a glance. Did that mean... the barrier was down?

“Mileena!” Suddenly, we heard Luke shouting from the top of the stairs.

Ah, guess he made it out... But what about the others? Before I could put words to my thoughts, Luke tore down the stairs and seized Mileena in his arms. *Uh...*

“Er... Luke...” she mumbled.

“I’m so glad you’re safe, Mileena,” he sighed.

“Um, listen...”

“Were you hurt?”

“No, but... um...”

“Ahh, it’s lovely to be young. But keep it in your rooms, all right?” the old innkeep chimed in.

That finally snapped Luke out of it, and he released Mileena. “Ah! Sorry, couldn’t help myself...”

“Yes, you could. Now, where are the other two?”

“Oh, right... Yeah, they’re fine.”

“Hey, Lina.” As if waiting for that cue, Gourry and Jade peeked over at us from the railing atop the stairs. “Figured you’d be okay.”

He figured, huh? *Well, I guess that’s a sign he’s got faith in me... But you could still show a little concern, Mr. Self-Proclaimed Guardian!* At least there was no need to worry about him sweeping me into his arms.

“They sent a demon after us. It wasn’t that Rebifor guy, though. What about you guys?” I asked.

“Two of them. Master Gourry and Master Luke defeated one, and the other disappeared. Rebifor wasn’t among them,” Jade responded.

I wondered if Rebifor’s absence was because he’d yet to recover from the blow I’d dealt him. Or perhaps...

“Hmm... Then it’s possible they might attack again right away,” I mused.

“Right away? You mean tonight?” Luke asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. We’ve skated by so far because they keep underestimating us, but the minute they decide to take us seriously, they might just start sending waves of opponents to wear us down. I mean, it’s kinda weird that Rebifor wasn’t here for this little shindig, right? Makes me wonder if there’s a second, more powerful force waiting in the wings. If so, our best bet right now is to get moving.”

“Get moving? You’re suggesting—”

“That’s right,” I nodded, not letting Mileena finish. In other words, we were heading straight for Gyria.

Mileena looked at me for a long moment and at last nodded.

“I completely agree!” Jade said from over the railing.

“Okay! It’s decided! Let’s get going—”

“Wait a minute!” came a sudden interruption.

I turned to the source... and remembered the innkeep was still there.

“I’m sorry to repeat myself, but your stew is ready.”

“Hurry up, you guys!” I called encouragingly.

“You don’t get to say that!” Luke grumped.

After I’d eaten my stew, we’d packed our things, paid our tab, and departed the inn down the night road to Gyria City.

“How could you have stopped to eat stew?!”

“C’mon! I couldn’t just leave food on the table!”

“Still, is it safe to be taking the main road? If the enemies are en route for a follow-up attack, we might run into them,” Jade said, interrupting my argument with Luke.

“I wouldn’t worry about that. Pure demons wouldn’t exactly be walking the road to our inn. They just pop outta nowhere unexpectedly. The one that split earlier probably popped over to wherever Sherra is... I guess not-so-unexpectedly. But if a second wave is coming, they’ll also pop up unexpectedly at the inn. Which means the road to the city is probably safe for now,” I explained as we walked along in the faint moonlight.

I continued on, my voice carrying on the chilly night breeze, “These demons seem to be pretty confident in their skills, and they don’t regard humans as much of a threat. That’s their weak point in general, and it applies here too. Even if they can teleport, catching people who are on the move will take them as long as it would anyone else.”

“Teleport?” Jade breathed in near disbelief. I could understand how surreal the idea sounded to anyone who’d never seen it with their own eyes. “But teleportation suggests very fast movement. I wonder why there’s been such a delay between their attacks...”

“Hmm...” Dude had a point. From the time Shaman had first attacked us on the road to Rebifor’s ambush in the city, and from then to tonight’s raid... There’d been multiple days between each skirmish. Given that they knew we were heading for Gyria City, they could’ve been a lot more aggressive in their pursuit. “Well, I’m sure they’ve got their reasons. For now, let’s hurry on to Gyria City!”

“I told you, you don’t get to say that!”

Fortunately, we managed to reach Gyria before dawn. (I was still pretty sleepy though.) I took advantage of the dark to Levitate us over the wall and enter the city with the guards none the wiser. (I was still *really* sleepy though.) The plan was to sneak into Jade’s house, catch some Zs, then find a home base come dawn, but...

“It’s... gone,” Luke whispered.

“Indeed... it is,” Jade said emptily, just standing and staring.

Where the house should have been sat a pile of rubble. It must have been a mighty fine mansion before its untimely toppling, though. The grounds were vast, and though they were hard to see from here, the gardens appeared to be well tended. There just... wasn’t a house anymore.

Sheesh... Jade said something about them seizing his assets, but I didn’t think that would include destroying the house itself...

“So... what’s the plan?” Gourry asked with a yawn.

I snapped out of my thoughts. “Oh, good question! We can’t just sit around gawking, now can we? I guess it’s time to...”

“Time to what?” Luke prompted me.

I just stood there in silence for a while. The truth was... I hadn’t actually thought of anything.

Guh! My lack of sleep is giving me brain fog!

“Anyway, let’s... get moving! Jade, is there anywhere else around here we can lie low?”

“W-Well, I wouldn’t know much about places like that...”

“Then... we’ll have to walk around until we find something,” I said, starting off in a random direction. The others followed behind me.

Guh! When you’re looking forward to hitting the hay, missing it feels all the worse!

“How about an inn in the slums?” Luke suggested.

“Sounds good. Which way’re the slums?” I asked Jade.

“I’m sorry... I don’t really know,” he replied.

Such mind-numbing conversations continued as we traipsed around and the eastern sky began to lighten.

Haaahh... Dawn already?

More and more people started to appear out on the streets as we went. Merchants off to sell their wares, children up early, soldiers on their patrols...

Wait, soldiers?!

“Hey! You there!” Before I could follow that train of thought to its appropriate reaction, a small group of soldiers was already coming after us. One pointed and said, “You’re Jade Caudwell!”

“I am,” Jade responded, puffing out his chest.

Ahhh! He’s not thinking!

“I knew it! For entering the city in defiance of your exile—”

I wasn’t about to let him finish this time! “Let’s beat it, guys!” I said, taking off in a dash. Everyone else quickly followed suit.

“Hey! Wait, you!” The soldiers gave chase.

We zig-zagged down streets and alleyways until...

“Diem Wind!”

Whoosh!

"Gwuh!"

"Ack!"

The wind spell Luke, our rearguard, let fly stopped the heavily armored soldiers in their tracks. We continued to speed off, leaving our pursuers in the dust.

Okay! We're in the clear! Yet no sooner had I thought that than—*Fweeeee!*—a high-pitched squeal rang through the area. One of the soldiers was blowing the whistle on us!

Not good! He's gonna draw a crowd!

If we were dealing with demons, we could blow them away and no one would complain. But these were just ordinary folk following orders. We couldn't off 'em like that. Which meant our only recourse was to run, but... where? That was the question.

"This way!" I heard a voice call from behind a building.

Huh? It kinda sounded familiar. We turned to look and saw a young man beckoning.

"Sir Jade, over here!" he called again.

"You're—"

"Hurry!"

"Understood! Come on, everyone!"

On Jade's urging, we followed after the young man. He took us through the back alleys, up a fire escape and...

"Here we are."

Eventually, he brought us to a room on the second floor of a rather new-looking building. It was a bit cramped for six people, but beggars can't be choosers.

Once we'd caught our breath, I indicated the young man with my eyes and asked Jade, "You know this guy?"

The young man answered for himself with a wince. "Well... we met yesterday, actually. At the gate."

At the gate? Wait... Oh!

"You're Gatekeeper No. 1!" I exclaimed.

"Um... I have a name. It's Maias," he said, wincing further.

"Who?" Gourry asked.

"You know! That guy! The unremarkable little toady who wouldn't let us through yesterday!" I told him.

"Well... I wish you'd put it another way..." Maias grumbled.

"But why did you save us? I've been exiled, haven't I?" Jade inquired.

At this, Maias lowered his voice. "Those were my orders and I'm still a soldier, so I didn't really have a choice in front of the others. But if I'm honest... I don't trust General Allus at all." He let out a sigh. "The promotion of

that mercenary woman, her getting the run of the place, and the report of General Grancis's passing... It all felt, um..."

"You think he was murdered?" Jade asked.

Maias nodded. "I do. Rumor is spreading all across town. And if it's true... the kingdom is finished! So, Sir Jade... I want you to find out the truth!"

"Why don'cha just do it yourse— Mmgh!" Luke began before Mileena clamped a hand over his mouth.

As reliant on us as our little toady was, the simple fact that he'd given us a place to hide out was a million times better than the alternative.

I wasn't sure if he'd heard Luke or not, but Jade replied, "Listen... are you sure this won't cause trouble for your family?"

"Don't worry. I came from another city to become a knight here. And no sacrifice is too great if it means making our kingdom a better place!"

"Very well! I shall honor that dedication. We'll expose the intrigues of General Allus and Sherra the mercenary to protect the people! Even if I've been stripped of my rank, I still have my pride as a knight! I'd gladly lay my life on the line to save the kingdom!"

"Sir Jade! You are truly the epitome of knighthood!"

"No, far from it. A true knight must—"

Yeah, I did not have the energy to deal with this chivalric rabbit hole.

"Anyhoo... let's get some shut-eye," I said.

"Good idea."

"I'm just gonna lie down wherever."

Ignoring Jade and Maias as they got lost in their own little world, the rest of us settled in.

We got a move on much later that day, sometime after nightfall. We'd awoken while it was still light out and discussed our strategy some, but there wasn't a lot to say about the basic strokes of what we had to do: infiltrate the castle, find Sherra, and beat her.

Jade knew the castle's basic layout, but understandably, not where Sherra herself would be or what the defenses were like. Our safest course of action thus would've been to gather intel first, but there was no guarantee we'd learn what we wanted to know. Moreover, reconnaissance was time-consuming. Every minute we wasted in town was another minute Sherra might be using to muster her forces or track us down, putting us in even hotter water than before. That left us with only one option—strike first, ask questions later! Yeah, it might've been absurdly reckless, but it was the only hope we had of catching the enemy flat-footed.

And so we left Maias to guard the fort, while Gourry, Luke, Mileena, Jade, and I made for the night-cloaked castle. The sliver of moon in the sky illuminated its dim stone walls.

“Welp, guess we’d better do this,” Luke said.

The group nodded in response. Our three casters then started chanting spells. I grabbed Gourry and Luke lifted Jade over the wall with a Levitation spell. Our destination was the guest lodging house on the castle grounds, which Jade claimed to know well enough. We flew along, letting him point the way.

Obviously, it was no sure bet that Sherra would be there, but it was as good an educated guess as any. If it turned out to be wrong, we could always tie up some guards there and get them to spill the beans on her whereabouts.

Soon enough, we touched down on the roof of the lodging house.

“So... how do we sneak in?” Luke asked.

“No need,” replied a voice that didn’t come from any of us.

In surprise, we all looked to see who it was. The source was a floating shadow, backed by the sliver of moon...

A demon!

3: The Castle at Night, Consumed in Flames

The creature looked kind of like a black kite. It was about the size of a person, but its body was flat, triangular, and translucent enough that we could see the vague outline of the moon through it. It had no arms or legs, but its head(?) contained a single unnervingly realistic eye. It was a cartoonish design by many measures... although I doubted there'd be anything fun or whimsical about what this guy could do.

On top of that, we had a couple of factors working against us right now. One was our footing. The other was the soldiers visible in the courtyard below, which signaled that the demon hadn't locked us in a barrier. Its intent was clear—it wanted to force us to use flashy spells that would bring people running.

But... hang on a minute...

"Lady Sherra told me... not to underestimate you..." The demon's lone eye rolled in my direction. "Lina Inverse... the woman who terminated Lord Hellmaster Fibrizo."

"Huh?!" Luke, Mileena, and Jade were understandably shocked.

I mean, if you wanna get technical, Hellmaster terminated himself. But on a brass tacks level, I might've been the cause, sure...

Nevertheless, the demon kite continued gravely, "I find it difficult to believe... but I see no reason why Lady Sherra would lie. And so I must not let my own guard down."

Dang, you guys are stupid! See, while it was blabbing on, I was finishing an amplified chant. "Dam Blas!"

For claiming it wouldn't let its guard down, running off at the mouth while I was whipping up a spell was proof of the contrary. Or maybe this thing was banking on my spell not being able to hurt it... Which was totally true! But I wasn't aiming for the monster!

Crash! Instead, the destructive fallout unfolded at my feet. My actual target, see, was directly below us—the roof we were standing on!

The monster's eye opened wide. It looked stunned. It must not have expected me to blow in the roof. If it voiced any kind of surprise, though, I couldn't hear it over the explosion. Of course, the rest of us would've been hurt pretty bad if we fell straight through. Thankfully...

"Levitation!" Luke and Mileena activated their spells simultaneously, so our descent to the building's top floor, down onto my freshly created pile of rubble, was a leisurely one. I wasn't sure if they'd anticipated my maneuver

or if they'd had other plans in mind when they started their chants, but it all worked out either way.

"Let's go, everyone!" I said and took off down the corridor. "Jade! Cover your face with a rag or something!"

"But why?"

"Just do it!"

As we ran, shouting back and forth, a door up ahead opened and a pudgy old man poked his nose out in surprise. He had a rather seedy look to him, but if he was staying in the castle guest lodgings, he had to be some kind of bigwig from another kingdom. I could work with that!

"What in the—" he started.

But before he could finish, I yelled, "Intruders! We must flee!" I grabbed his hand and began pulling him toward the stairway.

"What?! Intruders? Who are you people?" he clamored.

"Your fellow countrymen!" I assured him. "His Majesty ordered us to keep an eye on you in case something like this happened! Now hurry!"

"R-Right!" The flustered old coot seemed to take me at my word.

We thus proceeded first down the hall and stairs using the old man as cover. To no one's surprise, we encountered a group of guards along the way.

"Intruders on the top floor! Hurry!" I called to them before they could question us.

The patrolmen immediately looked confused. They probably recognized the old man, but seeing him on the run, escorted by a group of total strangers? Naturally they wanted to know who we were!

"Identify yourselves," they demanded, zeroing in on us.

The old man replied with gusto, "No need to worry! My kingdom sent them! Now hurry!"

"Right!"

Deferring to the old man's claim, the soldiers took off again. Maybe they'd just gotten used to seeing mercenaries around lately, or maybe we just didn't look that suspicious.

"Wait!" I shouted after the guards. "Where's Lady Sherra? We must inform her!"

"The northern tower, I believe..."

"Got it! We'll report in!"

Don't ask me what my "report" was going to contain. I was flying by the seat of my pants here!

Ha. It's so easy to trick people in a chaotic situation...

The moment that demon had spotted us on the roof, I'd decided to follow the great laws of infiltration. Namely, when sneaking into a place, to do it as unobtrusively as possible. And the best way to blend in right now was if the

whole castle was thrown into chaos. That was also why I'd asked Jade, the most recognizable member of our group, to hide his face.

We went through the same song and dance with the guards a few more times before making it out of the building. "Let's get away from here! And fast!" Spurring on the old man with us, we all headed for the northern tower while Jade quietly pointed the way. We only made it a short distance before...

"You!" A figure appeared to block our path. Do I have to say who it was? You guessed it—the demon we'd met on the roof. "How dare you deceive—"

But I didn't even have to chant a spell to take care of this dunce. I just pointed at the demon before us and shouted at the top of my lungs... "The invader!"

"What?!"

"Where?!"

"This way! This way!"

"Fiend!"

The castle guard immediately gathered around me.

"Get your bows!"

"No! It's a demon! Call the palace sorcerers!"

"What... Wait!" The demon didn't know what to do as all the soldiers turned on it. And in its hesitation...

"Fell Zaleyd!" Luke and Mileena fired off a joint spell.

"Guh!" the demon cried, destroyed on the spot.

Whew. What a hack...

"There's one more on top of the guesthouse! Hurry!" I called.

"Got it!" Having bought completely into my bullshit, the soldiers went running.

"All righty, now we're going *this* way!" At my urging, our party continued northward. After making sure the soldiers no longer had eyes on us...

"Hyah!"

"Ack!"

I delivered a chop to the back of the old man's head and laid him out. "To the northern tower! Hurry!"

"Hey... that was pretty harsh," Gourry scolded. I ignored him!

Running full tilt, we closed in on the tower. Despite being called a tower, it wasn't a freestanding structure. A long, straight corridor stretched from the castle to a wide, rectangular building with a round turret sprouting from it. Most of the castle guard was headed for the guest lodgings, so there didn't seem to be any security on the place. Once we'd gotten close enough...

"What?! What's going on?!" A bearded man in early old age asked as he poked his head out of an open door.

"Invader!" I explained in brief. "In the guesthouse!"

"An invader?! Who?!" he questioned further.

Before I could answer, Jade got out ahead of me, leaped at the man, and knocked him to the ground!

"What?! What are you—"

"It's me," Jade said fiercely, stripping off the mask covering half of his face. "I've come, General Allus."

"Jade?!" the man on the ground gasped in surprise.

Was this the notorious General Allus who'd put Sherra in power?!

"I have many questions for you," Jade said, then fell silent a moment.

I could only imagine. He needed answers from Allus... About Sherra. About his father's death. About what was going on in the kingdom.

"But right now, only one matters. Where is that woman... Where is Sherra?"

Allus let out a small sigh. "That woman, eh?" He sounded exhausted. Yet the split second Jade let his guard down...

"Hah!" Allus knocked the younger knight aside and got to his feet. "If you care to find out..." He drew the sword smoothly from his belt. "Fight and defeat me!"

"I shall!" Jade replied, returning the gesture. "Stay out of this, all of you!" he shouted to the rest of us as he charged off swinging.

Clang! Their blades collided with red sparks. Allus blocked Jade's slash, took a step back, then let fly a wide horizontal slice of his own. Jade blocked it and responded in kind. It was a proper duel—strength against strength, steel against steel. They traded blows two, three times. Both men swung their swords in wide, high slashes. And at last...

"Ngh!" It was General Allus who fell to one knee. Jade's last slice had left a shallow cut straight down from his right shoulder.

It wasn't that Allus was a poor swordsman. He wasn't particularly exceptional either, but Jade was clearly his better.

"You truly are General Grancis's son... I never stood a chance," he conceded.

"You dare speak my father's name? After you killed him?!" Jade accused.

Allus shook his head. "I didn't..." he began, then shook his head again and swallowed. "No, perhaps you're right to say that. It was I, after all, who introduced that woman to our liege... and who sent our kingdom down the path to ruin."

"You make it sound like you had nothing to do with my father's death."

"I won't ask you to believe me. It's natural for you to be wary, given the difficult relationship your father and I had. But I am truly devoted to King Wells. That is one thing I will not allow you to call into question. I don't think it's wrong to try to bring joy to the object of one's esteem," Allus said.

He was referring, of course, to the reigning monarch of Dils, Wells Xeno Gyria.

“But it’s also true that such loyalty can be viewed as sycophancy... That’s how General Grancis saw it. I brought Sherra to meet our liege because I thought he’d be pleased to acquire such a retainer. That should have been all it was... yet it wasn’t so. I don’t know how she got so close to the king after that either, but the next thing I knew, the two were inseparable. Still, I thought it was fine as long as my liege was satisfied. That day, too, your father called me to the castle to speak about Sherra’s ambitions... And some days later, I received news of his passing...”

Jade kept silent as he listened, sword still in hand.

“That was when I began to think, for the first time, that I might have been misguided...”

Just then...

“General!”

“General Allus!”

A group of soldiers flooded into the building, interrupting Allus’s story. *Of course! Was he just buying time until his forces arrived?!*

“You...” The soldiers turned their blades on us all at once.

“Wait!” General Allus stopped them. “The invaders... are outside. They left through another door. Don’t worry about me. Go...”

We were all shocked—the soldiers included. The general’s unexpected statement left everyone dumbfounded for a second.

“B-But General...!” the soldiers hesitated.

“Go!” Allus barked at them.

Still, they couldn’t just blindly accept what he was asking them to do. Some of them had to have recognized Jade. Jade, an exile, who was standing over the wounded general holding a bloody sword... It would have been crazier for them *not* to question the situation.

“That’s an order!”

Hearing that word, the soldiers grudgingly looked at each other. “V-Very well. But you’re wounded, General...”

“I told you not to worry about me. I have more to say to these people. Now go.”

The soldiers fell silent, then... “Understood. Please... take care.” They must not have known what else to say. And so, with those rather foolish final words, the soldiers turned around and headed in the direction Allus had indicated.

“Why did you...” Jade pressed once they were gone.

“As I said... there’s more I have to say,” General Allus responded with a self-reproaching smile. “It was around that time that I began to regret what I’d done. I thought that the only thing that mattered was pleasing our liege... but I found myself wondering if there were times I should have told him no anyway.”

Jade quietly sheathed his sword and glanced at us. “Would one of you... someone who knows healing magic... please heal this wound for him?”

“Sheesh, what a soft touch. Yeah, sure, just believe everything he says...” Luke muttered in disgust. Mileena, meanwhile, stepped away from him and cast a Recovery spell on Allus. Seeing this, Luke awkwardly added, “Uh... but I guess it ain’t bad to trust people sometimes.”

The cut on Allus’s arm slowly but surely began to close. “Thank you,” he said to no one in particular, then went on. “Several days later... the king summoned me and told me... that he’d put out the order, in my name, to have you and your brother exiled. And inevitably, by his side stood that woman... Sherra. That’s when I realized she’s the one running the kingdom now. A kingdom of fools—myself included. If only I had realized it earlier...” Allus let out a small sigh. “Sir Jade, you don’t have to believe me. You can even kill me if you wish. But... I’d like to ask you one favor. That woman is still with our liege. I won’t ask what you seek to do with her, but please... do not harm His Majesty.”

“I am devoted,” Jade said with a firm nod, “as I have always been, to King Wells. Aside from that, right now, I have no way of judging the truthfulness of your tale. And so... I have no grounds to punish you here and now.”

“I see...” The general sighed again.

Mileena watched silently from where she was crouched at his side. Allus’s wound hadn’t been especially serious to begin with, and it was now mostly healed. Nature would take care of the rest.

“I’ve kept you for too long... That woman, Sherra, is likely with the king in his office in the northern palace.”

“All right.”

“I don’t know who or what she is... but please be careful.”

“I’ll be back soon.” Jade gave Allus a knight’s salute, then turned around and ran down the hall.

The four of us followed after him. I looked back and saw General Allus, still slumped where he was, watching us run off...

Owing to the commotion outside, there were scarcely any soldiers in the castle complex itself. We passed the obligatory patrolman here and there, but either Gourry tackled them to the ground, or Mileena or I chucked a Sleeping spell to put them out like a light. All in all, we didn’t hit any major obstacles as we ran the breezeway across the lawn to the central palace. If Sherra was with the king, then the royal guard in general was probably sticking close by despite the ruckus outside. I anticipated we’d run into quite a few guards en route, but...

The minute we stepped inside the palace, we all stopped at the same time.

We found ourselves in a small meeting hall. It wasn't the main hall, obviously. Probably one meant for small groups of soldiers and servants to gather. The place was a ghost town at the moment, yet it was filled with a particular presence... Miasma.

"Another of those barriers?" Jade asked.

"Correct," a familiar voice answered.

"Rebifor?!" I called the name of the bug-eyed demon who'd attacked us with Shaman once before. I looked around but couldn't see him anywhere.

"I thought I could leave you to the castle's human soldiers and simply watch from afar... But you've forced my hand."

"Guess I'm better at reading and manipulating people than you guys are."

"Yes, it does appear so..." Rebifor seemed unfazed by my taunt. "Which means all the humans scampering about are in both of our ways, wouldn't you say? So I've taken them off the board entirely." With that, the door across the lobby suddenly opened with a bang as if to say *come right this way*.

"Ha! Don't make me laugh!" I puffed up as I responded to the still seemingly absent Rebifor. "We're only after Sherra! No way are we stepping into some trap obviously intended for us to waste time on cannon fodder!" I proclaimed.

"Er, Mistress Lina..." Jade whispered in response. "We have to go that way to get to the king's office."

Um...

"But I suppose we should get you off our backs before we fight Sherra, so we accept your challenge!"

"Are you only saying that because we don't have a choice?"

"Shut up, Gourry. Anyhoo, don't anyone let their guard down!"

And so we strode toward the door across the hall... to the battlefield where demons awaited.

We were ready for a fight. We'd infused Gourry's Magic Sucker Sword (named by yours truly) with a Dark Claw spell so it would pack a good wallop against demons. Every time we came to a fork in the hallway, Rebifor's voice told us which way to go.

"We appear to be heading for the audience chamber," Jade whispered as we followed the demon's instructions.

"Where's this office Sherra's supposed to be in?" I asked.

"I've never been there myself... but my father mentioned you have to go through the audience chamber to get there."

"Figures," I grumbled before falling silent.

Rebifor and his buddies were probably waiting in the audience chamber. After some walking, we arrived at an entryway.

"This is it..." Jade said, reaching for the door.

I grabbed his shoulder to stop him and cast a glance at Gourry. The big lug nodded, then drew his sword.

"I'll open it!" he declared, and then...

There came a blast of hostility from the other side. Gourry's sword flashed. The door, cut into several pieces, clattered to the ground. Beyond it were countless skulking shadows... and countless beams of light heading straight for us!

"Vuum Aeon!" Luke and Mileena incanted. Their anti-magic barrier surrounded us instantly!

Vssshahshahshahshah! The innumerable rays burst against the field, dispersing into particles. The moment the wave passed, I stepped out of the barrier and released the spell I'd been chanting!

"Bram Blazer!" The amplified strike tore through several of the shadows.

"Hraaaaah!" Meanwhile, Gourry and Jade came running in from either side, slashing and shouting. Luke and Mileena dropped their barrier, then rushed through the door too while chanting their next spells.

The audience chamber was a large hall with a high ceiling. A line of red carpet flanked by marble pillars led to an unoccupied throne. I estimated about twenty or thirty of the dark figures in the room, all reminiscent of Shaman and Hydra. Black from head to toe, bodies decorated in strange, mystical patterns... They had a variety of head and limb shapes. Some were even carrying weapons.

The place was swarming with them—but just them. There was no sign of Rebifor as far as I could see. Shaman might have been mixed in with the crowd, but I didn't have time to search him out now. If I let my guard down for a second, I'd get pounded with lances of fire and ice from all directions.

I desperately dodged through the incoming attacks, chanted a spell, and let 'er rip. "Blast Ash!"

Whm! The spell I released enveloped several of the dark figures, rendering them dust. I didn't really have time to get a look around, but it sounded like everyone else was in the thick of the fight now too. That said, for pure demons, these things weren't particularly tough... In fact, they seemed pretty darn weak. More on the level of lesser or brass demons.

Hang on... Have we got this in the bag?!

Yet no sooner had that thought crossed my mind than I detected a presence behind me. Startled, I didn't waste time turning around. I instantly dove to the side—just in time for a beam of light to streak by me, tearing through my cape.

“Excellent instincts...” Upon hearing this new voice, the demons in black all stopped in place.

I turned to see four figures standing there. It was Rebifor, Shaman, and two more demons I’d never laid eyes on before. One of the newcomers looked like a large, translucent man with no face. The other was moss green, with two tentacles dangling from each shoulder and a face made up of a single eyeball.

Rebifor scanned our party and said, “I didn’t expect these to finish you, but to see you clearing through them this quickly...”

That much was true. We’d wiped out... not quite half, but a third of the black demons in short order.

“I suppose the raw material makes all the difference... So they’re useless, then,” he muttered incomprehensibly, then turned his gaze on us. “It has been a while. I didn’t realize the last time we met that you were Lina Inverse, so I let my guard down. It’s time for me to repay the favor...”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself. Some people are just too polite,” I replied blithely to Rebifor’s words and slowly began to move.

The rest of the gang was also slowly moving into more strategic positions while keeping an eye on the black demons and Rebifor’s party. Rebifor’s squad showed no signs of movement on their part, either because they didn’t notice or didn’t care about our own.

“I owe a debt to the men as well,” the moss-colored demon announced.

“Wait, who’s that guy again?” Gourry whispered to Luke.

“You know who! He attacked us in the inn before!” Luke barked back.

Of course. This was the surviving half of the demon pair who’d attacked Gourry and Luke back in town.

“Well, all he did was give a hotshot introduction then run away cryin’ after we beat his buddy, so it’s no wonder you don’t remember him! What’s your name, anyway?” Luke taunted.

“Rikakizu,” the demon replied, seemingly unfazed by the provocation.

“You say something too, Baiz,” Rebifor prodded.

The faceless giant gave no reply. Of course, I was watching the whole time for an opportunity to whack him with a spell... but even as Rebifor talked, his party’s attention remained undividedly on us.

“Hmm... no introduction, then? That reminds me...” As if suddenly remembering, Rebifor turned toward Shaman with a pregnant tone. “Did *you* ever introduce yourself to them?”

“Introduce... myself... to them?” Shaman asked, tilting its head.

“Yes. Did you ever tell them who you are?”

“There was... no need... to...”

Rebifor's eyes narrowed in amusement. "Never mind that. Tell them your name."

"My... name..." Shaman said, then continued haltingly, "My name is... Grancis... Caudwell..."

A chill seized the room. *Grancis... Caudwell?! That means...*

"Absurd!" Jade's cry broke the silence. "That's... my father's name!"

"Yes, I know," Rebifor said mockingly. "And indeed... He is Grancis Caudwell, one and the same!"

"Liar! That thing's nothing like my father! Besides, my father is—"

"Dead? But have you seen his corpse? Saying someone has passed away from illness is a common cover story for assassinations... but it also works for disappearances."

"That proves nothing!"

"Are you familiar with lesser demons?" Rebifor continued, interrupting Jade. "They're the product of a lower-ranking demon on the astral plane inhabiting a small animal or similar creature with low mental defenses, transforming its body in the process."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Lady Sherra has the most amusing blade, you see..."

Ah!

"The demonic sword Dulgoffa... It's both sword and demon. It possesses a person and eats away at their soul, then transmogrifies them into what we call a greater demon. But what if Dulgoffa were to possess a person just long enough to annihilate their will, leaving us a human shell with no mental defenses whatsoever? And then, what would happen if we summoned a lower-ranking demon from the astral plane to possess that shell? This is the answer—a quite unusual form of low-rank demon."

"What... are you talking about?!" Jade cried, his voice shaky.

If you hadn't witnessed Dulgoffa's power for yourself before, Rebifor's story would have sounded like some tall tale... But for me, I couldn't deny it reeked of the truth.

If Shaman wasn't a pure demon and had to walk everywhere he went, that would explain the long downtime between attacks since he'd have had to return to the palace every time he needed new orders. That also explained the discrepancy between the way he fought and the way he talked, and why the other figures here weren't much stronger than lesser or brass demons.

This new revelation meant that General Allus really was merely a stepping stone, just as he'd claimed. Sherra didn't need his help at all once she'd established herself.

"...But there are a few problems with this method. Their magic power is roughly uniform, but their physical strength varies greatly based on the

human host's potential. You don't find the others in the audience chamber much of a challenge, do you?"

"You mean..." I cast my eyes around the horde of dark figures filling the room.

"Indeed. They're various nobles and officials of the kingdom who tried to stop our plans. Quite a few were also said to have passed from illness... But it seems most of them weren't particularly athletic to begin with."

"You're lying!" Jade shouted.

"I'm not," Rebifor responded coldly. "But you're welcome to see for yourself if you doubt me. You've crossed swords with your father in practice before, surely. You must remember his fighting style. Grancis, fight him. But go easy on him."

At this, Shaman took a smooth step forward. He raised the sword in his hand...

"Graaah!" Jade roared as he ran straight for Shaman.

Clink! Shaman easily parried Jade's opening strike like he'd seen it coming.

"You... Damn you! Damn you!"

Jade lashed out again and again. Shaman dodged or deflected each strike until—*Zing!*—he saw an opening and attacked for himself. Jade parried the blow and leaped back.

"It can't be..." he whispered quietly. His voice was quaking. "It can't be!"

"Are you so certain?" Rebifor pressed.

Jade fell silent for a moment, at a loss for words. "You're lying! So... So why—?!"

"Why is his sword technique the same? You know the answer, don't you? Grancis knows how you fight. You practiced together so often, after all."

"Ngh..." Jade went silent, his fists trembling. Then he turned his glare to Rebifor. "Turn my father back into a human!" he spat.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Rebifor replied, unfazed. "Even if I removed his demon host, he'd be nothing more than a drooling vegetable now."

"Liar!"

"It's true. If any part of Grancis's will still remained, do you think he would have killed your brother, his very flesh and blood, with his own hands?"

This time, Rebifor's words had Jade frozen completely.

He's right. I saw Shaman—no, Grancis—kill the man who was probably Jade's brother...

"You can't argue with that, can you? Heh heh heh..." Rebifor let out a quiet laugh, as if enjoying himself tremendously.

He's feeding off of Jade's despair...

Indeed, demons thrived on the negative emotions of the living.

"So?" I spoke up in Jade's silence. "What exactly are you people planning? Infiltrating a kingdom, seizing power, turning people into monsters... Chaos

Dragon Gaav did something similar not too long ago. His plan was to pick a fight with the demons of Kataart, but what about you? Trying to start an all-out war with the humans?"

"I don't really owe you an explanation, do I?" Rebifor responded with a smile in his voice. "We're only here for one thing—to try to kill each other. So we should really get started promptly, shouldn't we?"

"Promptly," my ass! After you took all that time to mess with Jade...

"You're right..." But it was Jade who agreed with Rebifor's statement. "That's the only way to save my father, isn't it?" With that, he leveled his blade at Grancis. "Then... let us begin."

And with that, we did.

Jade charged. Grancis did likewise at the same moment. The three pure demons fanned out, and the remaining black figures—the humans effectively turned into demidemons—took battle-ready positions.

"Fell Zaleyd!"

"Assher Dist!"

Luke and Mileena, having already recited incantations, fired spells that mowed through the shadowy throng.

"Graaah!"

Clink! Grancis deflected Jade's opening strike, then counterattacked. Jade parried and dodged. Grancis looked perfectly at ease, while Jade was the furthest thing from it—both in terms of technique and emotion. There was a palpable reserve in his blows. There was no way he could win like this.

Their swords met again, and again. Jade showed a moment's vulnerability, and Grancis didn't hesitate to exploit it! Then... *Clink!* Just before his blade reached Jade's body, Gourry's sword intercepted it. Grancis hopped back to take some distance.

"I don't need your help!" Jade cried.

"Look, man..." Gourry kept his sword between himself and Grancis, speaking to Jade with an awkward expression. "You're fighting like you're trying to get yourself killed. I understand how you feel, but I can't just stay back and watch a guy do that, even if you ask me to."

Gourry knew it. Jade did too—he couldn't beat Grancis. Jade was skilled, to be sure, but in an everyday sort of way. The skills Gourry and this version of Grancis possessed defied all logic.

"Right now, the only way to save my father... is to kill him," Jade whispered. He clenched his trembling fists. "I want... to save my father. It's my duty as his son... but... I know I'm not strong enough to beat him." It sounded like it killed him to say the words, but he nodded to Gourry. "Please... save my father."

“Yeah... I will. So now...” Gourry readied his sword again, facing Grancis. “Looks like I’m your opponent. Let’s go.”

Then came the clash of blades, Gourry’s against Grancis’s.

“Elemekia Lance!” I unleashed a spear of light, which Rebifor readily dodged. But when he did... “Break!”

I snapped my fingers, and... *Crash!* The light burst as it sailed by Rebifor! I’d altered the spell a bit to accommodate a delayed torrent.

“Tch!”

It wouldn’t do much damage, but it should still feel like an ice-cold shower, forcing the demon to flinch. In that moment, I drew my sword and charged at him, chanting.

“That same trick again?!” he shouted.

I thrust out the sword in my right hand.

“I won’t let you hit me!” Rebifor leaped back, just dodging the tip of my blade.

I took another step in, then raised my left hand... toward Rebifor’s head! I’d finished my spell!

“Not good enough!” he hissed as he dipped low.

Trying to avoid my attack and counter, was he?! Too bad...

“Elemekia Flame!” Magic doesn’t always have to manifest in the palm of your hand! I used a slightly altered chant to make it blast out from my abdomen—right on the level where Rebifor’s head now was!

In his surprise, the light hit him dead-on!

Fweee! Moss-colored tentacles whistled through the air at Luke from four directions in slightly delayed succession. The barrage forced him to leap back to avoid the whips or swipe them aside with his sword, but he did manage to thwart them all. When he did...

“Blast Ash!”

Whm! Responding to Luke’s voice, darkness consumed the body of the moss-colored demon. Then... *Snap!* With a sound like a wet balloon popping, it broke out of the enveloping shadow! Rikakizu had overwhelmed the Blast Ash through sheer magical force!

“What?!” Luke exclaimed in surprise.

Rikakizu closed in. Luke drew back while chanting his next spell. Waiting for that moment of vulnerability, the demidemons showered him with an indiscriminate hail of flaming arrows!

“Tch!” He just managed to dodge them, but it left him completely off balance.

Rikakizu's moss-colored tentacles howled through the air. One was aimed right at Luke's neck!

Magical arrows fired by the demidemons sailed at Mileena. She evaded them by the skin of her teeth, but the demons were already taking aim again... A split second later, one of them collapsed with a scream. Jade had run in from the side and cut it down.

The demidemons' attention now shifted from Mileena to Jade, but that didn't mean Mileena was completely off the hook. An exceedingly powerful, massive arm swung through the air toward her.

Whoosh! With a rush of wind, the translucent giant Baiz took a sweep at Mileena. She effortlessly evaded it with a leap backward—or at least, that was the plan. She landed, then dodged in a panic. The oversized arm passed literally right in front of her nose!

Did she misjudge the distance?!

I said Baiz was "translucent" before, but that was a little imprecise. To clarify, his body was sorta like that of a jellyfish. That had to make his moves kinda hard to read...

Mileena jumped back to get even more distance, then took a step to the side and released a spell she'd chanted at Baiz.

"Fell Zaleyd!"

But with swift strides belied by his monstrous size, Baiz easily avoided it. Mileena's spell kept flying and hit one of the demidemons beyond him. Then once again, Mileena and Baiz faced off.

Cling! Clank! Clang! The clash of sword against sword rang out incessantly. Grancis parried a strike from Gourry, and then Gourry deflected one from Grancis. Sparks flew again and again until both fighters jumped back simultaneously to get their distance. Then Grancis charged!

He was stooped low, as if he were crawling along the ground. He struck with an upward slash, which Gourry met with a downward one. If the blows were equal in terms of power, Gourry had the advantage!

Clink! Sparks flew through the air once more, and just then... Grancis released his left hand from his sword to pincer Gourry's blade between his fingers.

"What?!" the big lug cried.

After securing Gourry's sword with one hand, Grancis used his other to take a sideways slash at Gourry's legs! The blond swordsman managed to dodge with a vertical leap. If he could land on top of Grancis now, he could probably beat him.

Yet just as Gourry jumped, Grancis twisted his left hand—including Gourry's sword and Gourry along with it. A move like that must require inhuman strength, but then again, Grancis was no longer human.

Normally, Gourry would have been cast to the floor, but...

"Hng!" He managed to right himself in the air and maintain balance enough to land feet-first. This maneuver, too, was frankly inhuman.

Before Gourry could straighten up, though, Grancis was upright again. His left hand was still holding Gourry's sword. And then... the now free sword in Grancis's right hand swung right for Gourry!

Rebifor's head was shorn clean off. *That's one down!* At least, that's what I thought, but an unsettling feeling suddenly raced up my spine. I turned around just in time to see...

Whoosh!

A beam of light passed by me. The caster was... Rebifor! *He's still alive?!*

"Know when to quit already!" I screamed.

"Actually, you didn't even hit me," the headless demon declared. The area around his shoulders then began transforming to regenerate the missing appendage!

Wait, that's not right... Rebifor said that I hadn't hit him, and that could mean only one thing. He'd transformed to remove his own head before the spell made contact in order to dodge it.

What a freakin' creep...

When we'd fought before, I'd caught him off guard and forced him to retreat... But knowing he had a skill like this made him one tough cookie. To defeat him, I'd have to take him by surprise again. Could I do it? One way or another...

"Astral Vine!" I infused my drawn sword with magic.

"It's no use." Rebifor's eyes were smiling.

Severed by Rikakizu's tentacles, a head went flying... followed by several more, all belonging to demidemons.

"Stay out of my way, small fry!" Rikakizu scolded, leaving them quaking.

Meanwhile, Luke had managed to regain his balance. He interrupted his chant to say, "Huh, I dunno what your game is, but I oughta thank you."

"It's nothing... After running away once, I don't want anyone to think I won due to the aid of trash like them. I want to kill you myself. I'd like to kill you all, in fact... but you're the one person I *need* to kill."

"Cool. Go ahead and try it!" Luke invited, picking up his chant again.

"I will!" Rikakizu roared as he leaped forward.

Luke leaped back in turn, still chanting, but Rikakizu was faster! The demon got within grabbing distance, sending all four tentacles snaking

toward him at once. Midair, they split apart and became a swarm of a dozen much narrower tendrils—all racing to entangle Luke!

The battle between Mileena and Baiz seemed to have reached an impasse as they swapped blows, all easily dodged. Mileena wasn't misjudging the distance of Baiz's punches anymore. Once you knew the trick, it was easy to deal with. Baiz's translucent arms grew a little longer every time he swung. If you managed to evade his first punch mistakenly thinking his translucency just made his attacks difficult to gauge, you'd be in for a nasty surprise with the second.

But Mileena dodged him, chanting another spell. Baiz's punch attack came with a magical projectile, which Mileena avoided as well. Then...

"Elemekia Lance!"

Baiz dodged Mileena's spell, but it speared through another demidemon.

For most warriors, an opponent taking control of their weapon would be the death of them. But like Grancis, Gourry wasn't most warriors.

Bam! A blow from Gourry's fist to the flat of Grancis's blade sent it off course. He simultaneously planted a kick in Grancis's stomach. Grancis immediately released Gourry's sword and withdrew. Gourry pursued.

Grancis screeched as he flew back, conjuring a storm of magical arrows to hurl at Gourry. The big lug didn't have time to dodge them all!

"Sword!" Gourry shouted as he thrust his blade toward the incoming shafts of light. This triggered the Dark Claw spell cast into it, negating Grancis's light as the two magics collided! And then...

Thrrrk! Following through on his strike, Gourry ran Grancis through.

"Elemekia Lance!" Rebifor didn't seem bothered by my umpteenth casting of the spell. He simply opened a hole in his stomach to let it pass through. Too bad this one was a little different!

"Break!" As the spear of light was moving through him, I used the command to shatter it! He couldn't dodge this one! Except...

"Heh..." A small smile appeared on Rebifor's face. "I expected you to do that... but unless I let my guard down, a weakened spell like that won't hurt me in the slightest!" As Rebifor spoke, the hole in his stomach filled in.

Grr! He saw it coming! I'd thought of other ways to surprise him, but the timing would be tricky. If I tried something right now, there was a good chance I'd fail. That meant I needed to buy some time.

I chanted a spell under my breath...

"It's no use!" Rebifor approached, his tone brimming with confidence. "Nothing you do will—"

“Fell Zaleyd!” Mileena incanted from behind Rebifor. She’d fired a stream of magical bullets this way while tangling with Baiz. They were headed straight for Rebifor.

The surprised demon just managed to transform himself in time, opening a hole in his chest to let the projectiles pass through.

Now! I moved, thrusting my left hand out at Rebifor’s face! He turned toward me again.

“Did you really think that would—”

“Elemekia—”

“—catch me off guard?!”

The hole in the demon’s chest closed. When it did...

“Gaaaah!” Rebifor screamed.

In the moment Mileena’s magic had distracted him, I’d thrown the sword in my right hand at exactly the right time. Rebifor had looked down at the hole that he’d opened in his own chest, then turned his attention to me—or rather, the spell I was about to fire. He’d then started filling the hole in his chest almost unconsciously... right around the sword I’d just thrown into it. A sword enchanted with an Astral Vine spell.

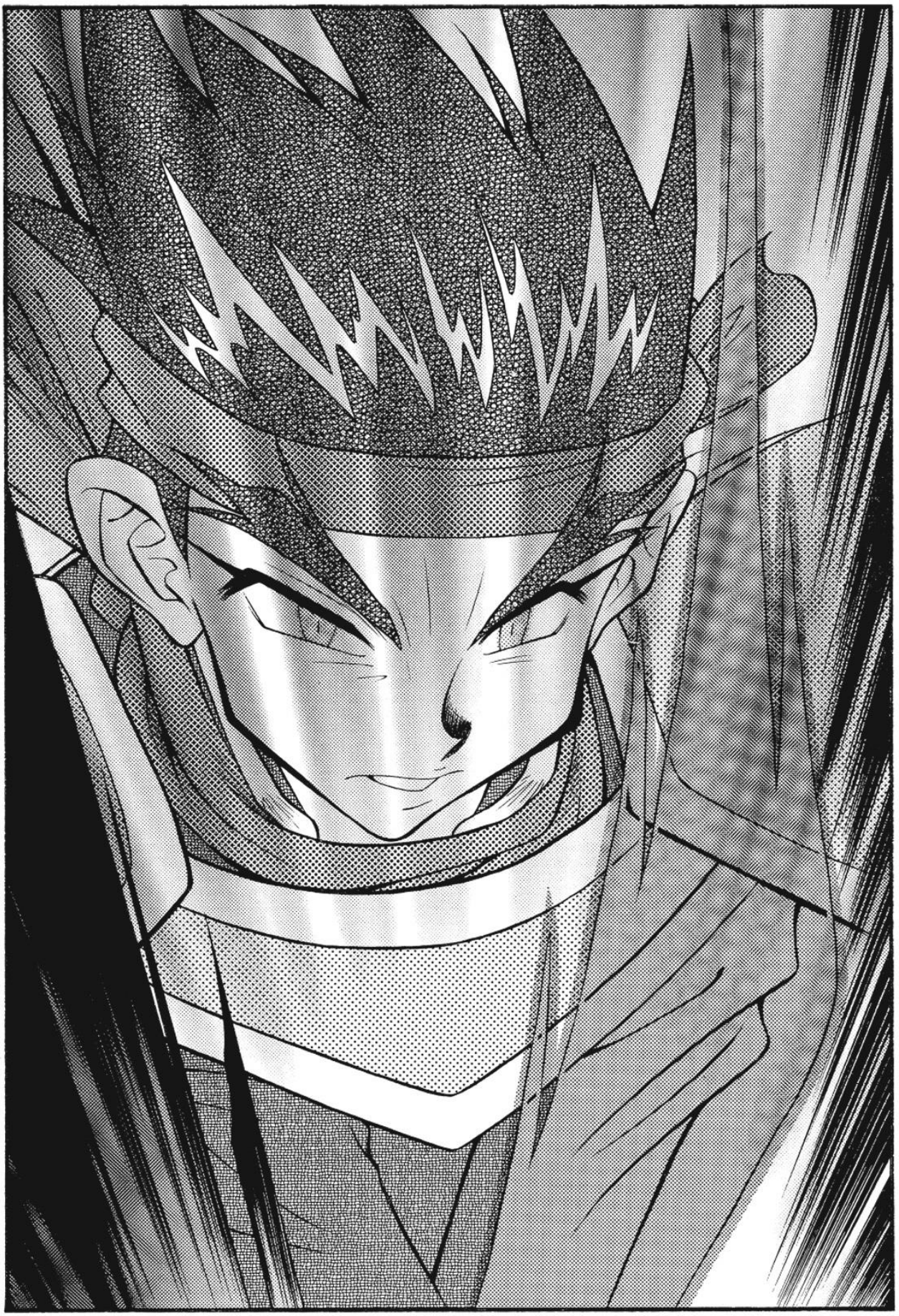
And just as Rebifor screamed, I finished incanting my words of power. “—Lance!”

Bwoosh! This time, distracted by the pain in his chest, Rebifor really did get his head blown off.

Luke suddenly stopped in the middle of his backward retreat. He tossed his blade aside... and rushed at Rikakizu! The demon, confused by the sudden change, was momentarily stunned.

“Ruby-Eye Blade!” Luke’s voice rang out.

The next instant... Luke vertically bisected Rikakizu, a ruby red blade glimmering in his hands.



Baiz's arm swept through the air.

Has he realized it?

Mileena readily dodged the magical blast Baiz silently released with the swing.

Guess not...

Mileena wasn't trying to defeat him, but to hold his attention while aiding her allies. She was only firing off spells when there was another opponent behind Baiz. Sometimes it was a demidemon, and sometimes it was Rebifor.

Baiz failed to realize he was the only demon left in the room—right up until I shot a spell dead into his back.

4: The Ancient Dragon Knows the Dynast Army's Plans

"I think... it's over," Luke whispered.

"Here, at least," Mileena replied.

As for Jade... Jade just stood there, still and silent, gazing at the fallen Grancis. If his nature were really more similar to a lesser or brass demon than a pure one, a normal sword would be enough to do him in. And sure enough, Grancis had been felled by Gourry's blade even after he'd expended the magic within. As we watched, his body crumbled in the manner of demons both demi and pure, leaving no trace behind.

"Ah... er..." Gourry stammered, clearly at a loss over what to say.

Jade turned to him and bowed. "Thank you for what you've done."

Still unsure of how to respond, Gourry stood there in silence, scratching his head.

Jade straightened up, then looked around and said, "Let's proceed." His voice was firm and his face resolute. "To the office. To Sherra."

Waaaaaaaaaah... aaaaaaaah...

"Is that... screaming?" Mileena asked quietly as we ran down the hall en route to the office.

We'd reached an area of the palace where only the king and his closest aides were normally allowed, and I gotta say... it was *way* drearier than I expected. The place was mainly unadorned stone walls punctuated only by the occasional sconce. A persistent howling echoed down the dimly lit corridor, its source unclear. Frankly speaking, it was eerie as hell.

"All I hear's the wind," Luke said indifferently.

"But it really does sound like a voice..." Gourry added, equally indifferent despite the inherent creepiness of what he was suggesting.

"The wailing of King Dils..." Jade whispered.

"What's that?" My ears pricked up.

"Oh! It's an old ghost story," Jade replied, quickly waving me off. "People like to say that the former king is still alive, locked away somewhere, the victim of a demon's curse..."

I'd heard that story myself. Twenty years ago, King Dils II had gone to slay the Kataart demons and returned to the castle afflicted by a curse known as Raugnut Rushavna. The curse had transformed him into a writhing mass of flesh, immortal yet eternally in pain. To this day, he supposedly remained shut away in the depths of the castle, howling ceaselessly, unable to die...

“But I think the tale is really just a way to account for the sound of the wind blowing through the halls,” Jade concluded.

That would be a fitting explanation, but the rumor seemed plausible to me. Everyone knew that the old king had gone to slay demons and was never seen again. And I personally knew that demons were real—Raugnut Rushavna too. If I’m being honest, part of me wanted to go find out if there was any truth to the myth... but this was no time for a side quest.

“Oh, right. Gourry, draw your sword again. Everyone else step back,” I said and chanted a spell. “Blast Ash!”

Bwoosh! Darkness enveloped the sword, coalescing on its steel and spreading across it briefly before the blade returned to its silver sheen.

Okay, now his magic sword’s all charged up! Not that I expect Blast Ash to do much against the likes of Sherra...

“This’ll affect a decently wide area... probably a little larger than an adult’s arm span, so don’t unleash it on an enemy if any of us are too close by. Got that?”

“Yeah, got it,” the big lug responded casually, sheathing his sword.

Do you, *though?* If he accidentally hit one of us with that spell, his usual offhand apologies weren’t gonna cut it...

“Say, do you really know where this office is?” Luke asked as we continued forth.

Jade replied hesitantly, “I think so...”

“You think so, huh?”

“Well, as we left the audience chamber, I saw placards marking the antechambers and such. Now, I was just a low-ranked knight and I never visited his office myself, but I’ve never heard of anyone getting lost looking for it.”

Not that anyone who did *get lost would be eager to cop to it...*

Fortunately, the hall ahead was a straight shot for the most part. We hit a branching path here and there, but none of them were particularly long, suggesting it would be harder to get lost than not. I also couldn’t really imagine that our destination would be deliberately secreted away.

“Oh, right, Jade. Let’s get this squared away in advance,” I said while running. “That Allus guy said Sherra was with the king, right?”

“Yes, I recall that.”

“So when we get into the room, the first thing I want you to do is grab him and make tracks.”

“Huh?!” Jade stopped in place, incredulous. “W-Wait a minute! I want to fight with you! I won’t be a burden, I swear!”

“It’s not about that,” I said, hurriedly waving my hands. I mean, yeah, I did think Sherra was a bit out of Jade’s league... But for that matter, I wasn’t confident that the rest of us stood a chance against her either. “All I’m saying

is that if we're gonna throw down, *someone* has to get the king to safety. We can't just be chucking spells willy-nilly while he's in the room, right? Sherra might even use him as a hostage! Someone needs to get him out of the danger zone, but the four of us have neither the desire nor the duty to do the deed in a pleasant manner. We're here to beat Sherra, not save the king. So the task falls to you."

"B-But..." Jade argued, redoubling his pace to catch up to us.

"What? You'd rather fight, even if it means the king dies?"

"No! Obviously, I can't let that happen..."

"Right? That's why this is on you. Of course, the king trusts Sherra, so I doubt he'll be inclined to just do what we tell him... If you really want to get him to safety, you'll probably have to knock him out and drag him away."

Jade fell silent at my words. "Very well. I'll get him to safety, then return as fast as I can to join the battle. Is that acceptable?"

"That's not what I'm saying, man..."

He wants to fight that bad, huh? Sherra was far more powerful than Jade imagined... possibly even more than Luke and Mileena imagined. She wasn't gonna go down with one good stab from some piddly magic sword.

I sighed. "If you want to make sure the king is secured, you have to get him out of the castle. Out of the city, even. If we catch Sherra in a *destroying* mood rather than a *fighting* one, nowhere within the outer walls is safe."

"Surely you exaggerate..."

"Hardly. And think about it. Those demons we fought in the audience chamber... You really think that's all the goons they have?"

"You mean there are more?"

"Entirely possible. These guys want this nation in their control for some reason, which means they won't let the king go without a fight. Who's to say they won't send a goon squad after him once you drop him off somewhere and come running back?"

"That's... a good point."

"And it's like you told that guy... What was his name again? The dude who took us in. Gatekeeper No. 1."

"Maias?"

"Yeah, him. It's like you told Gatekeeper No. 1. Even stripped of rank, you still have the heart of a knight. And a knight's job is to defend his king, right?" I shot Jade a wink.

"Ah..." he breathed, then smiled slightly. "Yes, that's true. Very well! I, Jade Caudwell, hereby reswear my sacred oath to protect His Majesty Wells Xeno Gyria with my life!"

Attaboy.

"You'd better be ready to follow through on that sacred oath of yours," said Luke, coming to a stop and looking back. There was now a door in view

at the end of the long hallway with light streaming through its cracks. “Looks like we’re here.”

The plaque on the door declared it an office, so we knew we were in the right place.

Knowing what I did, we couldn’t risk this dragging on for too long. Sherra wasn’t called the General of the Dynast for nothing. She was hellaciously strong. So much so that a single blow from her would kill any of us on the spot. And once one of us fell, the rest would follow like dominoes.

In other words, the outcome of the fight ahead boiled down to a solitary question: Would Sherra obliterate one of us before our teamwork could best her? Either way, it would be a short match. The only uncertainty was who would be left standing when it was over.

We all exchanged a silent nod, and then... *Wham!* Gourry kicked in the door, his sword at the ready.

The room beyond was far bigger than I was expecting. Just ahead of us sat a large dark oak desk stacked with papers, beyond which were a man and a woman. The man was presumably King Wells. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with long black hair and a solid build. I had to admit, he had the aura of a leader... He didn’t strike me as the kind of guy who’d succumb to Sherra’s feminine wiles or magical influence, but as they say, it’s the ones you don’t suspect that are the most dangerous.

Kneeling not far behind him was a figure clad in a blue dress uniform with silver embroidery. Her long hair was done in a braid, and she carried a black longsword. The two seemed the spitting image of a king and his loyal knight. But this knight’s true master wasn’t the lord of this kingdom... it was the lord of darkness!

“Who are you people?” the man boomed, seemingly uncowed as he stood from his chair.

Jade immediately went down on one knee. “Jade Caudwell, formerly of the Blue Knights. I came here against your wishes... Please forgive my impudence.”

“Jade... Caudwell? Ah, yes. One of General Grancis’s sons, aren’t you? I believe I ordered you exiled, did I not?”

“Indeed, my liege. But the clear corruption in our kingdom behooved me—”

“Silence, traitor!” the knight—Sherra—interrupted. Slowly, she rose to her feet, her eyes fixed sharply in his direction. “Are you the one stirring chaos in the castle? What are you after? My liege’s life?!” she barked.

Smart little demon... Sowing the idea that we were here to kill the king all but guaranteed he wouldn’t listen to a word we said.

“My liege, you must believe—” Jade pressed.

“Silence!” Sherra shouted, interrupting him. “Do not dirty your ears with their lies, my lord. I beg of you, take your leave. I shall dispose of them posthaste.”

“Please do. I’m counting on you,” King Wells agreed placidly without any sign of misgivings.

She took a knee again and kissed the back of his hand. “I swear it upon the sword that serves you.”

And as she rose once more, Wells turned around and manipulated something on the wall. *Thunk.* With a low sound, a partition in the back opened.

Of course... Every good palace has a couple secret escape routes.

“Majesty!” Jade tried to follow after his king, but Gourry stopped him. “What?!”

“Don’t be stupid! You’ll be killed if you go now!”

Dude was right. Sherra was standing at the opening. *Rrrumble...* And with another heavy sound, the wall closed behind King Wells. I doubted there was any way to reopen it from here. But that didn’t mean we should just give up on tracking him.

“Jade! Find General Allus! Work with him to get the king to safety!” I shouted.

“I shall!” Jade spun around and rushed out of the room.

A man of Allus’s rank surely had to know all the castle’s hidden passageways. If Jade apprised him of the situation, I was betting he’d be willing to lend us a hand.

“All righty.” I turned my eyes back to our opponent. “Now it’s just us and you... General Sherra.”

Slowly, she returned my gaze. “I see... So Allus sided with you, did he?”

“He did. But boy, you sure are selling this whole loyal knight schtick... Kissing the king’s hand and everything. Ever thought about quitting the demon business and taking up acting?”

“Is that all you have to say to me after all this time? What poor manners. You’ve been a fly in the ointment of my plans, Lina Inverse.”

“Maybe your plans just kinda suck? You’re the servant of Graushera and your name is Sherra, so if your schemes have a gimmick half as cheap as your name—”

“Silence!” Sherra roared angrily enough to quiet me. “Do not comment on my name!”

Ah, whoops. That one really ticked her off! I’d meant to talk trash, but that might have backfired. Maybe she’d asked Dynast about her name after all and gotten an answer like *“I just didn’t care, teehee!”*

“That aside, you said I was a fly in the ointment of your plans...” I quickly changed the subject. “But what exactly *are* your plans? I know you’ve been

lending Dulgoffa out here and there... Are you behind the demon hordes spawning across the region too?"

"I don't owe you an answer!" she said bluntly, then drew the black sword, Dulgoffa, smoothly from her belt.

Wuh, that was fast! She's got even less chill than the last time we tangled!

"This is... my last chance!" she said. I didn't know what she meant by that... but I didn't have time to wonder! Her aura of hostility was swelling!

She's coming!

Dulgoffa sliced through the air—*Vrum!*—producing a black shock wave on a beeline for us! We immediately scattered. The black wave tore through the room and destroyed the sturdy door on the other side.

"Fell Zaleyd!" Luke must have been cooking up a spell in advance, but the moment he unleashed it, Sherra dispersed it with a flick of her left hand.

"What?!" he shouted, stunned by the power of a top-class demon.

Mileena was right on his heels with a follow-up attack. "Elemekia Flame!" The blast, which could terminate a brass demon in one hit, was dispelled by an effortless swing of Sherra's sword. And then...

"Graaah!" Gourry dove in from the side while her arms were spread wide from blocking both spells. He wasn't about to let this opportunity slip by!

Slash! He sliced right through Sherra's torso, then swiftly leaped away... but Sherra's expression didn't change in the slightest. She just hurled a series of small magical projectiles after him. The big lug managed to evade them.

Figures... Gourry's slash didn't do a thing. The power of a Blast Ash couldn't put a scratch on her.

"This is freakin' ridiculous!" Luke complained.

"Yeah, just like Lina's been saying!" Gourry responded. "In which case..."

Whomm! Gourry swung his sword at Sherra again. She was well outside of its range, but for a moment, a darkness enveloped her and then disappeared. Gourry had unleashed the Blast Ash from his sword... and Sherra had completely no-sold it.

What did you think that was gonna accomplish, big guy?

Sherra didn't even spare the others a glance, just unleashed a shock wave at me as I chanted! I began a dash to the side. Sherra tore across the floor, keeping pace with me.

So she's after me first!

But she'd have the advantage at close range! The shortsword in my hand couldn't block the magical sword-slash-demon Dulgoffa! Gourry ran in from the side, thrust out his sword, and parried Sherra's shock wave with his blade!

Of course! He wants to absorb some of Sherra's power!

But could the sword take it?! The shock wave twined around the blade, and—*Crick!*—the metal screamed!

Is it hopeless after all? I lamented. But as I did, Gourry drew the sword back. Letting what remained of the shock wave's power slip past him, he put himself between Sherra and me.

"Keh!" Sherra breathed, withdrawing as she realized the property of Gourry's sword. And then...

"Dynast Blas!"

Krickakrack! I unleashed a magical thunderclap, amplified for good measure!

Sherra let out a silent cry as the lightning wreathed her body, and then... *Pop!* With a bursting sound, it dispersed.

"Hyahhh!" In that moment, Gourry slashed at her.

Clink! Dulgoffa rose to intercept his sword. The keening collision echoed through the room when the two blades met. But Gourry had the upper hand in terms of skill! After a few clashes, it was Sherra who leaped back.

"Hrah!" Gourry swung when she did, sending the shock wave she'd released moments ago flying back at her.

"Trivial!" Sherra mocked, dispersing it midair. She then produced more magical projectiles around her and—

"Ra Tilt!"

Bwooooosh! Mileena conjured a blue pillar of flame to engulf Sherra. Gourry sprinted forward, thrusting his sword into the silhouette within the fiery column.

"Did we do it?!" Mileena cried.

But the show wasn't over yet! All Gourry's sword pierced was a shadow—the old demonic lizard's tail trick! She'd left a fragment of her spirit form as bait while retreating into the astral plane. And then she reappeared...

Behind me?! I thought at first, but she was behind Mileena instead!

"Look out!" Gourry cried.

Sherra let fly her volley of magic projectiles. Mileena twisted in an attempt to dodge them, but...

Crash!

While she avoided the worst of the damage, one of her pauldrons was blown to pieces as the shock wave sent her flying back! Sherra pursued, and...

"Ruby-Eye Blade!" Luke produced a crimson magical blade and charged in to stop her!

Twice in one day?! That's gonna be pretty damned draining!

Magical shock waves went flying as Dulgoffa clashed with Luke. His Ruby-Eye Blade would be the sharper of the two swords, but Dulgoffa could regenerate itself indefinitely so long as Sherra was around. In other words, Luke would run out of energy first!

That meant I had to make my move now, while Sherra was locked in place. I began reciting the incantation for my void sword, the Ragna Blade.

Will I make it in time?! As I watched Luke's magic sword wane with wicked speed, I figured the answer was *probably not*. I hadn't finished my spell yet.

At last, his crimson blade was extinguished. Dulgoffa swung down, and... *Slash!* There was a flash of steel. Sherra's body pitched forward.

Gourry!

His earlier thrust hadn't been for nothing. He'd absorbed the Ra Tilt's power into his emptied blade. *Look at you, using your head for once, my man!* Even for a top-rank demon like Sherra, a blow like that had to smart.

Dulgoffa spilled out of her hand... and into Luke's freed one! *Hang on, wait a—*

"What?!" Sherra cried out in shock, just as...

Thunk! Luke pierced her with Dulgoffa!

"Ah..." A faint moan escaped her throat.

Luke quickly released the black blade and leaped back.

"...Ah..." Unsteadily, her own sword protruding from her stomach, Sherra began to lurch toward him. As she approached...

"Hahh!" The Ra Tilt Gourry unleashed from his sword tore into her.

Sherra was still standing... but not for long!

"Ragna..." She turned to face me. A shadow of doubt flashed through my mind, but I didn't have time to entertain it! "...Blade!"

The sword of void I summoned sliced straight through the General of the Dynast.

Plink... With a low, clear sound, the demonic blade snapped. As each piece hit the floor, it crumbled like parched earth. Dulgoffa was dying, having lost the source of its power—its master, Sherra.

"Well, we worked it out... I think," Luke whispered.

"Even so," Mileena scoffed, "grabbing that sword the way you did was reckless."

"Aw, Mileena! You really do care!"

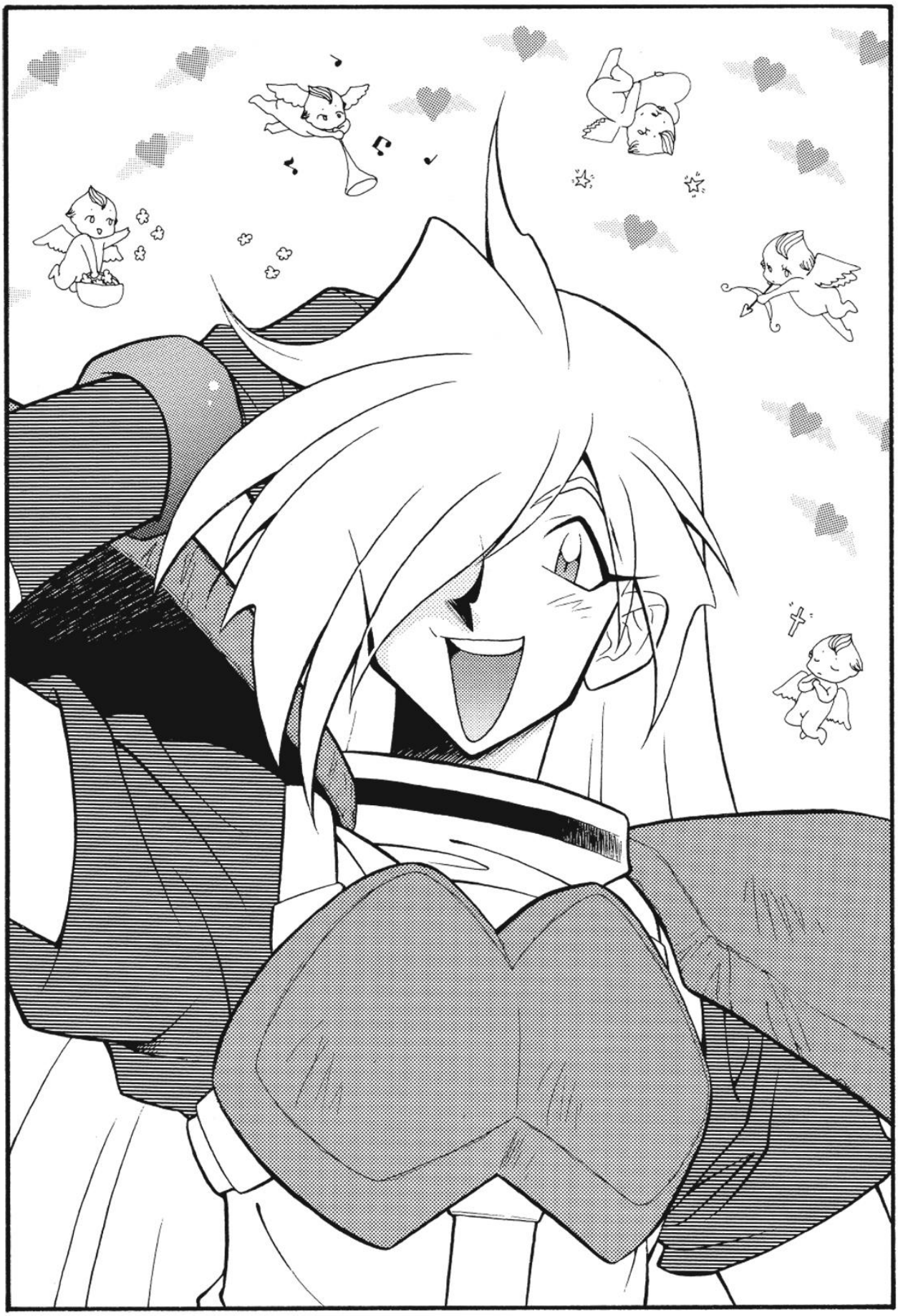
"It might have possessed you, and then we would have had another enemy on our hands," she countered heartlessly.

"Aw..." Luke whimpered.

Mileena was right, though. If, in that moment, Sherra had ordered Dulgoffa to possess Luke, we would've been screwed for sure. I mean, not that she'd ever expected someone to swipe her sword and turn the damn thing against her...

Still, as a gal who'd pulled off more than her fair share of seat-of-the-pants nonsense, I really had to hand it to Luke.

"Well, at least that's over," Gourry said cheerfully.



Except...

"What are you talking about? Now we have to straighten out all the political crap around the castle, and that ain't gonna be easy!" I reminded him.

"Right..." Luke and Mileena muttered in agreement.

But Gourry replied with his indefatigable smile, "Hahaha... Silly Lina. Thinky stuff is above my pay grade, so as far as *I'm* concerned, it's over!"

"That's not something to brag about!" I shouted as I gave Gourry a glorious sock to the face.

"So... what was the point of all that, anyway?" Luke whispered as if that question had only just occurred to him. "Sherra was tryin' to take over the kingdom and all, an' we stopped her by killing her. I get that much. But what was her endgame?"

Dude had a point.

It was now a few days later, after we'd departed Gyria City. The immediate danger was behind us. General Allus had gotten Sherra branded a spy from a hostile kingdom (though I was skeptical anyone really believed it), and he'd intervened to have Jade reinstated as a knight. The guy whose name I forgot—Gatekeeper No. 1 who'd sheltered us—netted himself a sizable reward, and we also bagged a little compensation for our work. (Not exactly *fair* compensation considering we'd slain the freakin' General of the Dynast... but whatever. I'm over it.) Once that was all worked out, General Allus had resigned from his post, and the Kingdom of Dils turned back to reconstruction. But...

Seriously, what was Sherra planning? We'd never uncovered what she was really up to, and that didn't sit right with me. It just felt like there *had* to be more to her scheme.

Moreover, I couldn't stop wondering... Had Sherra really given her all against us? I wasn't exaggerating when I'd told Jade that nowhere in the city would be safe if she got serious. Yet she'd only used a fraction of her power. Granted, we might've just managed to finish her off before she had the chance to flex. Had she thought she could beat us without using all her strength? Or was she so desperate to get the king under her thumb that she'd willingly restrained herself? Either way, the thing nagging at me the most was when I'd used the Ragna Blade to kill her...

Was it just my imagination... or was she smiling at me then?

Of course, I hadn't mentioned that part to anyone. Could've just been my eyes playing tricks on me, after all.

"Welp, we're not gonna think our way to an answer in this case," Gourry chimed in.

“When have you ever thought your way to an answer in *any* case?” I teased him. Nevertheless, the big lug was right.

“Not to change the subject, but we seem to be goin’ in the same direction... Where are you guys headed next?” Luke asked idly, then clicked his tongue and wagged his finger at me. “Ah, but don’t you dare say, ‘Wherever you’re going.’ I don’t need you hornin’ in on me an’ Mileena’s honeymoon.”

“This is not a honeym—” Mileena began, then stopped short.

We followed suit. We were currently walking east down the city road, a wide highway packed with pedestrians and carriages. It was flanked by forest, and from the woods came a sudden war cry...

“Hraaaagh!”

Kra-booooosh! A flying ball of fire took out a covered wagon up ahead. A cacophony of screams erupted around us.

“Rrrrrgh...” A growling lesser demon burst out of the brush—no, not just one! There was a second, then a third, and then... I could sense their presences among the trees all around us.

Another demidemon swarm? Was Sherra not behind them after all?! I didn’t have time to dwell on the answer. The demons were tearing into the people on the road!

“Elemekia Lance!” The spell I chucked killed a lesser demon heading for a woman paralyzed by fear.

“Hyah!” With a cry, Gourry ran out, swinging his sword at the demons. Luke joined in, and so did Mileena.

We made it rain attack spells, but there were just too many targets! I also had no idea how many more demons were lingering in the woods... If they’d all been clustered up some distance away, I could blast the whole forest away with a Dragon Slave, but we were already in the thick of the onslaught.

To be honest, it was getting frickin’ annoying! Demon charge, attack spell. Demon charge, attack spell. We were certainly chewing through the suckers, but they just kept a-comin’!

“Dynast Breath!” *Crack!* I blasted another demon as it lunged from the brush.

“H-Help me!” As I was chanting my next spell, a middle-aged traveler suddenly grabbed hold of my cape.

Hey! I get that you want help, but you gotta let me move, man! I thought to myself, but just as I was about to wrest my cape free... a brass demon roared out of the underbrush!

Ack! Not good! My spell wasn’t ready yet! And I also had a dude clinging to me!

The brass demon locked eyes on me. Then... it was mowed down by a beam of light. *Kra-paaash!* The light’s movement was lagged by a roar as it sent trees and demons alike flying.

That light...

Then came a second beam.

Is that... the white giant?! I realized, turning my eyes toward the origin of the light. When I did, there was another flash behind me. *Huh?!* I whipped back around, but the trees inhibited my view.

"Waaaaagh!" The man crawled away from me, clearly confused beyond comprehension.

It did seem like the giant was after the demons, but one hit from that thing was liable to roast us on the spot.

"What *is* that?!" Gourry shouted at me.

"I think it's the white giant!" I shouted back over the din.

"But there are two of them!"

"Yeah!"

"What do you mean, 'yeah'?!"

While we were discussing that... "Hey! Anyone think we maybe oughta get outta here?!" Luke called.

"I do!" Mileena agreed as they ran up to us.

"But there are still people around!" I objected.

"No there ain't!" Luke insisted.

I looked around and saw that we were, in fact, the only ones left. *Huh?! When did you little bastards...* The man who'd grabbed my cape, previously cowering helplessly on the ground, as well as the petrified woman were now booking it down the road like champion sprinters.

You just leave us holding the bag?! At least there was no reason to stick around now!

"Got it! Let's make tracks!"

"But Lina—"

"But what, Gourry?! FYI, if you say something dumb, I'll smack you down right here!"

"It's just... I think the attacks have stopped."

"...Huh?" Come to think of it, I couldn't hear any more smashy-roary around me. No further signs of demons in sight either. "Is it... over?"

"It is. For now," said a man from deep in the underbrush.

Huh?! Wait... I know that voice. I turned to see him just as he emerged from the flora. Indeed, it was exactly who I was thinking of—a handsome, blond middle-aged man in loose-fitting blue clothing.

"Master Milgazia?!" I was so shocked to see him that I couldn't help crying out.

A while back, in the midst of a different kerfuffle, I'd paid a visit to the towering Dragons' Peak in the north and met Milgazia, a golden dragon elder. He was a legit dragon, but he could also take on human form, and when he did, this was how he appeared.

Aha... I assumed that last blast of light was from the white giant, but it was actually a golden dragon's laser breath.

Still, what was Milgazia doing off Dragons' Peak?

"I heard familiar voices and names," he said. "And indeed, here you are. It's been a while, human girl. You too, human man."

"Long time no see," Gourry replied, scratching the back of his head.

"Don't tell me you don't remember him," I said.

Gourry looked hurt. "Come on, of course I remember! He's that big lizard guy."

"Please do not call me a big lizard." Milgazia leaned in and stared straight into the big lug's face, his expression terribly serious.

"Ahhh, sorry, sorry!" Gourry apologized hastily.

"But I must say," Milgazia turned his eyes to Luke and Mileena, "your other two companions have changed their appearances a great deal."

"You got it all wrong!" exclaimed Gourry, waving his hands.

"Totally different people!" I followed suit.

"I am aware. It was a joke," Milgazia said, still stone-faced.

Guys... I so *do not get dragon humor, okay?*

"But if you're alive and well, then you must have conquered your previous trial," he continued.

"Yes, I'd say so," I replied, looking around. "But, uh, what's going on here? First it's demidemon swarms, and now a guy who's never left Dragons' Peak before is out in the world. I figure it's gotta be something serious, but..."

"Indeed," Milgazia muttered in assent, then cast a glance back at Luke and Mileena.

"Oh, don't worry about them," I assured him. "They're trustworthy. They helped us beat General Sherra."

"What?!" Milgazia looked understandably shocked. "You defeated... No, I suppose this isn't your first time surviving such an encounter, is it? Hmm," he said, then sank into thought.

"Hey... someone wanna fill us in here?" Luke asked.

"It's a long story. I'll catch you up later," I responded.

Soon after, Milgazia looked up again. "Yes, I see... If you promise to keep it among yourselves, I believe there is something I should share with you."

"Surely there's no need for *that*, Uncle Milgazia," came a piercing voice, this time from behind me. I turned to see a beautiful woman step out of the brush, moving so smoothly that she didn't even rustle the leaves. She looked about twenty years old, had long golden hair, and was wearing curiously designed white plate mail over loose-fitting blue clothing.

Now, I said she *looked* around twenty because she was undoubtedly much older. Those pointed ears and that skin like porcelain? Yeah, totally pegged her as an elf. Elves lived five or six times longer than humans and possessed

magic many times more powerful, but they rarely showed themselves before our kind. If I had to guesstimate, I'd say she was probably a century old.

She continued to address Milgazia without even sparing us a glance. "Mere humans will be of no assistance whatsoever. They'll just spread more chaos, at best."

"*Mere* humans?" A vein bulged on Luke's brow, but she unsurprisingly paid him no mind.

"No more of that, Mephy," chided Milgazia. "As fellow inhabitants of these lands, they have a right to know. And they may very well be useful."

"But..."

"I've made my decision. I'm going to tell them," he declared simply.

"Very well..." this so-called Mephy agreed grudgingly.

"Pardon the interruption. She has little fondness for humans."

"I can tell," I said with a shrug.

Once upon a time, humans had persecuted elves. That was ages ago in human terms, but to someone much longer-lived, the wounds still probably felt fresh.

"Now, where to start... I needn't tell you of the recent rash of lesser and other low-tier demon spawnings. They seem to be acting primarily as an arm of Dynast Graushera's army, and I've seen a similar pattern once before."

"A similar pattern?"

"Yes. Demidemons spawning, fear running rampant among the populace... Said fear seeds war, which in turn seeds further chaos. Dynast wasn't responsible last time, but given the similarity of the circumstances, I imagine the goal is the same."

"What goal?" I asked.

Milgazia was silent for just a moment. He then said gravely, "Another Incarnation War."

Afterword

Scene: Author + L

Au: Another reprint in the can! That's *The Dynast Plot*!

L: It seems the readers spent a lot of time between publications imagining my awesome adventures! I received 40,000 letters describing their ideas!

Au: Yeah, right! This was a simultaneous reprint—three volumes at once! There's literally no time for that to have happened! You're lying your ass off!

L: Erk! You got me!

Au: I sure did! Besides, what was the title? "L vs. the Beautiful Innkeepers Nationwide: Kansai Chapter"? That sounds like it would just be about you complaining about the innkeepers at various destinations and picking fights with them.

L: Ye of little imagination! As an example, let's integrate battle manga elements! My master is killed, so I set out on a quest to find the culprit! I fight tofu in Kyoto, then spend three days training at Mt. Rokko to hunt the nefarious Kobe beef. And at last in Osaka, there's a violent clash over whether it's okay to eat okonomiyaki with rice! An ally comes to save me in my time of need! I drive them away without hesitation!

Au: You drive them away?!

L: There could be some romance too! I travel alone to Kyoto, where I happen to meet some fine tofu and we share a steamy encounter—

Au: Wait a minute here. You can describe it like a battle or like a porno, but all you're doing is still eating tofu! The beautiful innkeeper never actually appears!

L: Who cares?

Au: Who cares?! It's in the freaking title!

L: Those don't have to be totally accurate as long as it comes around in the end. Maybe after all that, I return to my inn where I meet the beautiful innkeeper, and we have a fight about our difficult life experiences.

Au: What kind of book is that?! It'll just depress your readers! Moreover, is it really okay for that to be the only place the book's namesake matters?

L: Oh, chill out. You called this book "The Dynast Plot," and that only becomes relevant when the stupid dad-joke dragon comes along at the end to say Dynast might be up to something. We'll only find out in later volumes if he's right or not!

Au: Erk! Well, it's pretty common for me to get close to finishing my manuscript and still not know the subtitle. It's also pretty common for me to choose a random title for something and end up with a story that doesn't

really match. That may be why, when I'm choosing stories for the short story collections, I'm just looking at a list of titles and going, "Wait, what happened in these?"

L: So it's okay if the beautiful innkeeper only makes a cameo, right?

Au: Erk! Okay... fine, you're right.

L: I could also make it a mystery! Strange serial murders occur wherever I go!

Au: That's pretty cliche... but it might be more interesting than your other proposals.

L: I never learn the culprit!

Au: Hang on a minute! Aren't you supposed to solve the mystery?!

L: Huh? Why should I? Crimes are for the police to solve, yeesh.

Au: Okay, that's totally valid! But it's still supposed to be a mystery, yeah?

L: So? Mysteries are *about* the mystery. In other words, mystery is all you need. Who said you have to solve anything?

Au: Argh! There was that old *X-Files* show that was a mystery series, but the culprits always ended up being aliens or other strange creatures. But wait! If there are murders everywhere you go, doesn't that suggest *you're* the killer?

L: Oh, please. By that logic, the culprit in every detective series would be the detective. It's all just a coincidence. But if you insist on finding out who the murderer is, maybe I'll catch a news report at the next inn revealing that they caught the culprit. They'll even reveal the motive!

Au: That's not very exciting.

L: Well, I've given you plenty of material to work with. The readers can run with that to imagine more of my adventures!

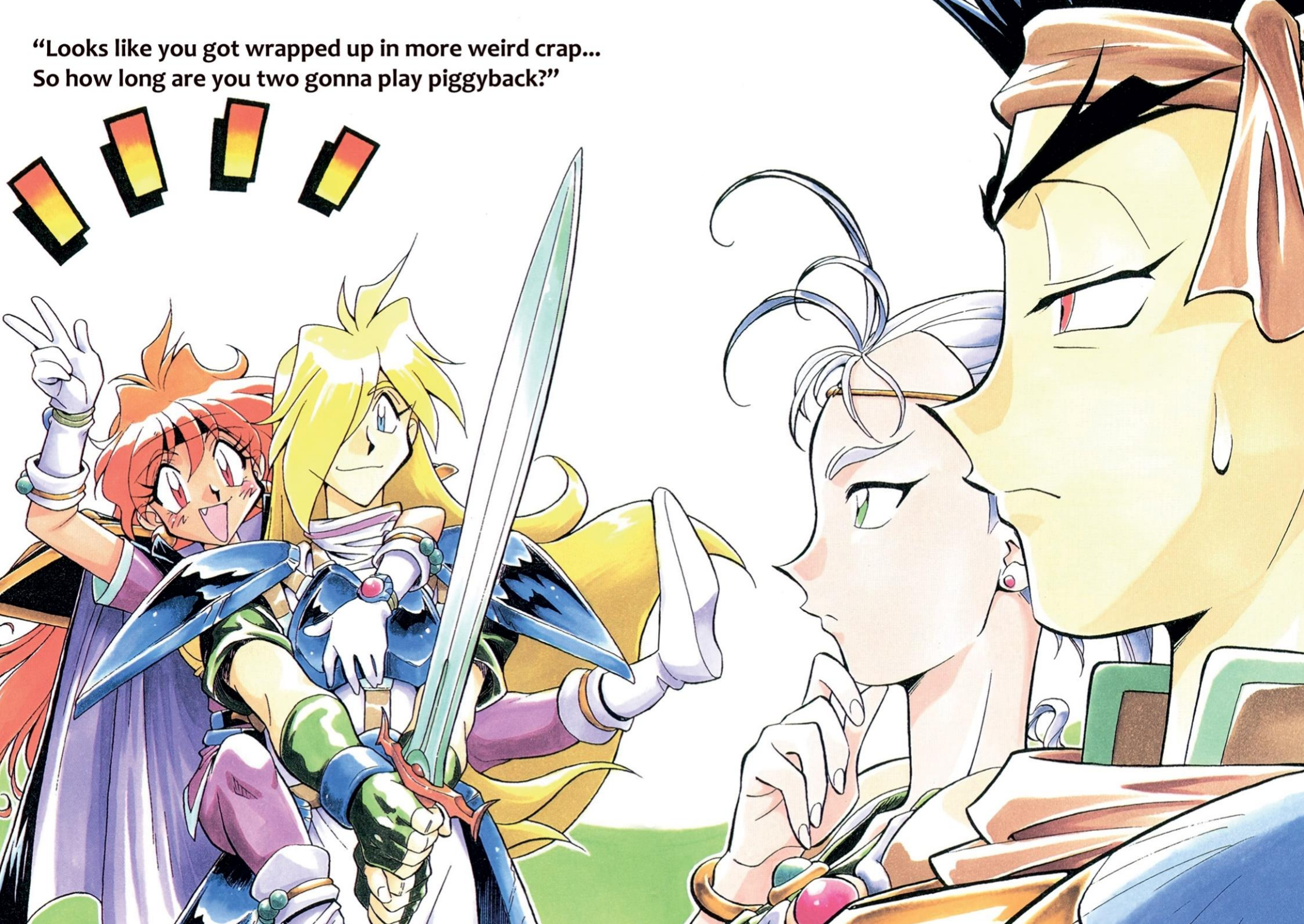
Au: You call that material? Guys, don't fall for this. It'll just make her more insufferable.

L: I'm counting on you, everyone!

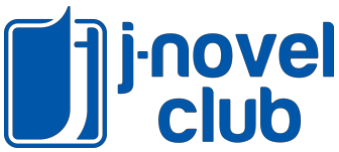
Afterword: Over.

Slayers 12

THE DYNAST PLOT


“Looks like you got wrapped up in more weird crap...
So how long are you two gonna play piggyback?”

"But what exactly *are* your plans? Are you behind the demon hordes spawning across the region too?"
"I don't owe you an answer!"



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Slayers: Volume 12
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Translated by Elizabeth Ellis
Edited by Megan Denton

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Illustrations by Rui Araizumi

SLAYERS Vol. 12
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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2022